

Staging Cross-Border (Reading) Alliances: Feminist Polyvocal  
Testimonials at Work

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## **Dedication**

To Quinn, whose conception coincided with the early beginnings of this project.

## Abstract

Practitioners of contemporary feminist testimonios are more than writers; they are textual activists who employ writing as a social tool. Corresponding with the “deliberative” strain of testimonio (Nance 2006), feminist testimonios utilize sophisticated modes of narrative address to self-consciously direct readers towards empathetic interpretations of their works for the purpose of social change. This desired effect is realized through direct address, a focused deployment of pathos (an appeal to the emotions), and polyvocal narrative frameworks. By creating a textual bridge to bring disparate cultural and material worlds into affective proximity my study argues that feminist testimonios enact a model of cross-border feminist alliance building attentive to the possibilities and challenges of forging coalitions across social differences and geopolitical locations for the purpose of social change.

Section One: “On Testimonio: A Spirit of Resilience in Textual Form” outlines my working definition of “feminist testimonio.” This discussion addresses the fields of Latin American Studies and Autobiography Studies to reframe testimonio as a methodology and life writing project in the service of social justice efforts rather than as a pre-determined genre with fixed narrative conventions.

Section Two: "Truth Telling Through Tale Telling: Feminist Perspectives on the Epistemological Relevance of Experience and the Uses of Storytelling in Feminist Polyvocal Testimonios" positions feminist testimonio in dialogue with feminist theory debates on partial perspective and situated knowledges (Haraway 1988), post-positivist realist identity theory (Moya 2002), and the epistemic value of experience (Scott 1991) in order to frame it as a story-based methodology that centers on marginal experience narratives to produce more complex, less false social knowledge.

Section Three: “Activist Deployments of a Writing Project at Work: Polyvocality, Pedagogy, and Praxis in Collaborative Feminist Testimonio” engages the dialogic methods and rhetorical practices that feminist activist polyvocal testimonios utilize to stage their political interventions. It articulates how feminist collaborative activist projects at once embody and enact their political visions, thereby blurring the boundaries of theory and method.

Section Four: “Feminist Testimonio as Narrative Framework: Testifying to the Politics of the Imagined” articulates how and why feminist literary authors come to translate historical events into the realm of fiction. It argues that the self-conscious use of testimonio as a narrative framework—positioning the reader as witness to a fictional narrative testifier—undermines a mindless, capitalist consumption of politically motivated literary texts by replacing a unidirectional model of entertainment with a bidirectional social pact.

Section Five: "Translating Worlds: Edwidge Danticat and Feminist Testimonio in the Haitian Context" supplements the comparativist model of previous chapters with a geopolitically rooted discussion to attend to the multiple genres Danticat utilizes to produce historically grounded literature that testifies to the cultural vitality of Haitian and Haitian-American women in the face of colonial legacies and neocolonial conditions.

My postscript, "Forging Cross-Border Reading Alliances: One Reader's Perspective" performs a first-person narrative to illustrate how the life writing practices employed by feminist testimonio have shaped my own writing and interpretive practices as an engaged feminist scholar.

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## Introduction: An “I” That is “We”: Revisiting the Politics of Collective Truth Telling

“Once, when I told her I liked to listen to her *historias*, she laughed and asked me if I had ever heard the saying, “*Cuéntame algo, aunque sea una mentira*” (Tell me a story, even if it’s a lie). In a more serious mood, she would often wonder aloud whether the gringos would believe her *historia*—not because what she had told me wasn’t the true story of her life, but because she feared that an understanding of what she had told me called for a leap of empathy that she suspected the gringos might not be able, or willing, to make. No, she finally decided, the gringos would never believe what she had told me.”

~Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story*

“If one looks at the history of post-Enlightenment theory... [t]he person who *knows* has all the problems of selfhood. The person who is *known*, somehow seems not to have a problematic self. These days, it is the same kind of agenda that is at work. Only the dominant self can be problematic; the self of the Other is authentic, without a problem, naturally available to all kinds of complications. This is very frightening.”

~Gayatri Spivak, “Questions of Multi-culturalism”

Years after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize (1992) for her activist work on indigenous Guatemalan land rights, Rigoberta Menchú found herself the center of political controversy regarding the veracity of her book, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1983). If the publication of North American anthropologist David Stoll’s *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999) sought to complicate the politics of any one person speaking for the truths of an entire community—as he suggested Menchú’s text attempted to do—then the *New York Times*’ reduction of Stoll’s argument to a two column exposé replaced Stoll’s already misdirected attempt at intellectual rigor with journalistic vulgarity. As a result, Menchú’s international reputation quickly shifted from reputable “truth teller” to “deceitful woman.” The ensuing knee jerk distrust of Menchú’s narrative account rehearses well-known colonial and patriarchal scripts in which the testimony of an indigenous third world woman subject became all too easily displaced by the counter-testimony of a white male scholar from the northern academy.

In a follow-up interview to her *New York Times*' incrimination, Menchú unapologetically defended her narrative with the seemingly simple assertion that: “*I Rigoberta Menchú* was a testimonial, not an autobiography” (Aznárez 110). While this distinction seems self-evident for Menchú—that testimonio and autobiography are dissimilar genres with divergent goals and modes of representation—this difference was clearly not apparent to the majority of the *New York Times* North American reading public. What then, does it mean for Menchú to defend her truth claims by arguing that her book was a testimonial and not an autobiography?

With the political stage of the Menchú controversy as a potent backdrop, my project more broadly considers the “problem” of experience and subjective truth-claims in knowledge production. Specifically, it conceptualizes the power relations at play when socially marginalized subjects utilize alternative life writing paradigms to perform socially lived theory and how dominantly positioned reading audiences come to interface with such texts. I do so through the avenue of what I term “feminist testimonio,” an umbrella concept for a hybrid body of work that utilizes life writing practices to deliver macro-level social critique in the form of first-person narrative accounts. As the opening words of Behar and Spivak highlight, the political efficacy of such narrative accounts runs the constant risk of being interpreted within a reductionist paradigm in which the truth-claims put forth by the speakers (read as “authentic” marginal social subjects) are either uncritically believed as transparent, uncomplicated narrative truths of life-as-it-happened, or alternately, wholly dismissed at the attitudinal whim of geopolitically

privileged reading audiences who make the choice to remain uninformed on global political issues and their entanglements with them.

My project works to disrupt this narrow interpretive model by moving us beyond the realm of the “true/not true” binary in order to complicate the ways we understand this power-laden relationship between speaker, reader, and text in contemporary feminist testimonio. I do so by framing the story-based methodology employed in such works as a grounded, flexible form of political theorizing that self-consciously builds empathetic interpretive bridges between reader and text through the use of pathos (an appeal to the emotions) as a political tool within first-person narrative frameworks. I argue that the embodied, affective residue present in such accounts is a central rhetorical strategy for anticipating the defensive and apathetic responses of socially privileged readerships while also creatively reworking the power differentials between marginalized speakers and dominantly positioned reading audiences.

This is particularly illustrated by feminist testimonios that employ co-narrational, polyvocal frameworks, and with which I primarily engage. The adoption of a “many-voiced” framework is one of the central rhetorical strategies undertaken by contemporary practitioners of feminist testimonio in order to call attention to the “staging” of their representations, and to refuse to accept the one-dimensional position of “native informant.”<sup>1</sup> Such frameworks allow practitioners of feminist testimonio to boldly insert themselves into the fraught terrain of knowledge production. Through their employment

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<sup>1</sup> For more on how these representations can be read as “staged performances,” see Shank, Sofia and Richa Nagar. “Retelling Stories, Resisting Dichotomies: Staging Identity, Marginalization and Activism in Minneapolis and Sitapur.” *Rethinking Feminist Interventions into the Urban*. Eds. Linda Peake and Martina Reiker. Oxford: Routledge 2012.

of hybrid and experimental representational practices that highlight how truth claims are always socially-situated, practitioners<sup>2</sup> of feminist testimonio challenge ready-made assertions over whose truth claims counts as “knowledge,” and establish themselves legible as knowledge producers in their refusal to be read as noncomplex, “authentic,” third world subjects. Indeed, the Menchú controversy serves as a powerful example for understanding why polyvocal frameworks have become a key rhetorical device in calling attention to the “stagedness” of such life writing practices.

To return to the opening question—what does it mean for Menchú to defend her truth claims by arguing that her book was a testimonial and not an autobiography—I argue that were testimonio and autobiography to enjoy equal recognition for their intellectual and literary merits (as “memoir” and “autobiography” seem to do), Menchú would not need to articulate such a distinction. But this is not the case. Nor is it the case that these narrative forms are “simply” alternate preferred ways of writing the self. Rather, these different forms of life writing are constructed out of divergent philosophical lineages and theories of subjectivity, thereby yielding different political effects. While autobiography has been traditionally utilized to convey western bourgeois narratives of the “self-made man,” testimonio is firmly rooted in liberation struggles in the Global South.<sup>3</sup> Menchú’s insistence on her book being understood as testimonio and not

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<sup>2</sup> “Practitioners” is a term that I have coined to refer to the writers and speakers of feminist testimonio. I use this term as a way of calling attention to the self-conscious rhetorical shaping of life stories the authors employ in order to interrupt dominant representational scripts. More so than “authors,” “writers,” or “speakers,” the term “practitioners” highlights this mode of storytelling as a methodology, and as a practice, in which the narration of life stories is performed in the service of social justice efforts.

<sup>3</sup> My utilization of the terms “Global North” and “Global South” does not narrowly refer to hemispheric locations. Rather, I use them to refer to unequal power relations on the global stage, especially in regards to racialized, classed, and economic positionings. I understand these terms as necessarily unstable and acknowledge the contextuality of any and all power relations. Indeed, I find the concept of “worlds within

autobiography thus confronts more than an arbitrary disagreement on its proper genre description.

In essence, what Menchú was accused of was representing others' experiences as her own; of constructing a composite narrative that wove together several people's life events and integrated them with her own life story. For Menchú, this is nothing to deny, instead arguing, "The history of the community is my own history . . . . I did not come from the air, I am not a little bird who came alone from the mountains . . . . I am the product of a community" (Aznárez 110, 113). Menchú's response addresses one of the central tenets of testimonio, whereby a narrative "I" is called upon to represent the experiences of the "we," in which the narrator speaks as a member of an oppressed community or social group who utilizes the genre to bring attention to a collective social problem. True to this writing form, the experiences of several community members are "grafted" onto the narrative body of the central speaker ("Margin at the Center" 81). Thus, while Stoll claims to have "caught" Menchú in a lie, his accusation refuses to recognize the intentional rhetorical shaping of her narrative account. In so doing, Stoll ignores the performativity of Menchú's life narrative as an intentionally crafted text and reduces it to positivist evidence (Schaffer and Smith 37).<sup>4</sup>

On a textual level, the violent dismissal of Menchú's text points to a lack of knowledge of testimonio as an established narrative form, and a general obliviousness to

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worlds" a useful reminder on how even within a given geopolitical site there are "many Norths" and "many Souths" that correspond with the locational power relations at play.

<sup>4</sup> One particular "lie" that garnered much attention was Stoll's accusation that Menchú did not witness the murder of her brother as her text suggests. When later interviewed about this Menchú calmly and freely names her mother as the eyewitness, framing her act of narrative substitution as a form of protection since her mother could have faced serious consequences for speaking out (Aznárez 111). Menchú further contextualizes her decision by adding, "Today I can tell you all these things because nobody will be assassinated tomorrow because of it" (114).

the fact that other forms of self-representational practices exist outside of dominant western autobiographical paradigms. The outcry that followed Stoll's questioning of the "facts" of Menchú's story illustrates the North American reading public's deep investment in and internalization of autobiography as the quintessential form of life writing, as well as disregard for the level of artifice present in any autobiographical act. More generally, it signals the cultural currency of literary works and the level of trust readerships place in them to reinforce their understanding of foundational cultural ideological configurations such as "self" and "truth." In short, and as illustrated by the fallout of Menchú's text, the concept of life experiences and understandings of the self as in constant relation to community formations proves largely illegible for a citizen body deeply entrenched in individualist rhetoric, as does a more subjective, flexible model of truth-value for an audience groomed within a juridical model of truth that favors objectivity and concrete fact.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond an unfamiliarity with the genre and principles of testimonio, the discrediting of Menchú's account speaks to a more troubling deep-seated cultural chauvinism that refuses to engage with knowledge producers on their own terms when these terms fall outside of dominant western paradigms. The misrecognition of Menchú's text therefore serves to consolidate and reinforce dominant ideological and representational practices by accusing her of doing autobiography "wrong." But to counter in Menchú's words, "[i]t is not a question of believing my own truth or someone

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<sup>5</sup> As my work will address, I argue that another central rhetorical tactic of feminist testimonio is to "traffic" in the language of liberal individualism through the employment of first-person narration in order to gain intelligibility within first world circuits, but that they always operate in excess of these very same paradigms.

else's; I'm simply saying I have a right to my memory, as do my people" (116).

Politically, the backbone of Menchú's statement rests on her right, and the right of all indigenous Guatemalans, to processes of self-definition. Her insistence that the narrative is testimonio and not autobiography is a succinct argument that her narrative account has been (mis)interpreted within a juridical model of truth rather than its conveyance of the composite truth-value of the day-to-day and life struggles of indigenous Guatemalans.

By narrating her account in terms of collective memory, Menchú also stakes a claim in how testimonio can be utilized to advance social struggle.<sup>6</sup> From Menchú's perspective, Stoll's fact checking misses the mark; or rather, the wrong facts are being checked. While she is raked over the coals, indigenous Guatemalans continue to lose more land, struggle to access education, seek adequate political representation. By deflecting blame onto Menchú, Stoll enables northern readers to sit comfortably in their first-world bubbles, unaffected and blameless, claiming victim status for falling prey to the fictional ruse of this third-world troublemaker.

A highly politicized scandal at the time, the Rigoberta Menchú controversy continues to be discussed and debated in undergraduate classrooms as well as between scholars in the realms of testimonio, literature, and human rights. As stated, my own interest in the Menchú controversy is as a cultural event that offers rich insight into larger debates that testimonio raises on the relationships between memory and truth, the relevance of experience in knowledge production, and the challenge that this genre

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<sup>6</sup> Working against a purely documentary interpretation and towards an intentionally crafted perspective of Menchú's account alternately rubs up against Western notions of "art for art's sake" given her activist role. As argued by bell hooks, a "covert form of censorship is always at work when writing that is overtly espousing political beliefs and assumptions is deemed less serious or artistically lacking compared to work that does not overtly address political concerns" ("Women Who Write" 19).

continues to pose to a North American cultural attachment to autobiography. But while I have evoked Menchú's narrative and public berating to introduce some of the central themes and tensions underpinning my project, this is also where I lay her case to rest. Too often, discussion of Menchú's text, both in terms of its formal qualities and in relation to its subsequent controversy, stands in metonymic relation to all discussions concerning testimonio. It is my contention that this textual fetishization has kept criticism on testimonio at a standstill, rehearsing the same questions and directing inadequate attention to less well-known—and perhaps more rhetorically and politically complex—testimonial works.

Indeed, rather than engaging with the social justice work these narratives set out to accomplish, scholarship on testimonio has become increasingly apolitical and out of touch with the writing form's activist intentions. As argued by Eva Paulino Bueno in "Race, Gender, and the Politics of Reception of Latin American *Testimonios*," "the study of *testimonio* has been transformed into a game of mirrors in which North American academics who write, speak, and publish on the subject assume the positions of spokesperson . . . determining which book is worthy of study and why" (118). Increasing concerns over unequal power relations between (subaltern) testifier and (first world) documenter and audience—accompanied by the dwindling evidence that the genre will directly lead to tangible and immediate social change—has also led to a series of articles denouncing the subversive potential of testimonio. Although these concerns merit careful attention, I agree with Kimberly Nance who suggests that "declarations of testimonio's triumph and reports of its demise . . . [are] premature and [are] revealing more about the

genre's ability to frustrate literary and cultural critics than about testimonio itself" (Nance 5). This point notably, if indirectly, addresses how many testimonios are not written for an academic audience, nor are they meant to be contained within an academic context. Rather, as texts that emerge from a specific cultural context and with focused political intentionality, testimonios are not purist in form, content, or political-theoretical allegiance, a reality that serves to confound scholars who are trained to "master" and "dominate" the meaning of a text and/or to engage with creative works in disciplinary specific ways.

Instead of arguing for an academic disengagement with testimonio narratives, I propose a re-energized, redirected mode of inquiry that takes its inspiration from the hybrid textual politics of testimonios themselves. While paying homage to the influential reach of Menchú's text, my project works to break through current scholarly stasis with a reminder that testimonio did not begin nor end with *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. The remainder of my project turns specific attention to contemporary feminist testimonios. These works at once share a deep affinity with Menchú's text even as their methodologies are continually revised to gain force and legibility in first-world circuits, and to circumvent some of the foundational narrative strategies that led critics to question the veracity of Menchú's account. By bringing into focus the varied landscape of contemporary feminist testimonios my project delivers an analysis of the rhetorical and imaginative tropes they utilize to paint richly textured representations of gendered subjectivity in order to document current inequities and to imagine more egalitarian futures. The remainder of my project works to illustrate the claims I lay out in this introduction.

Section One: “On Testimonio: A Spirit of Resilience in Textual Form” provides a working definition of what I conceptualize as “feminist testimonio.” I begin by situating this discussion in relation to the fields of Latin American Studies and Autobiography Studies to enable a more expansive understanding of testimonio as a methodology and writing project in the service of social justice efforts rather than as a pre-determined genre with fixed narrative conventions.

Section Two: "Truth Telling Through Tale Telling: Feminist Perspectives on the Epistemological Relevance of Experience and the Uses of Storytelling in Feminist Polyvocal Testimonios" positions feminist testimonio in dialogue with feminist theory debates on partial perspective and situated knowledges (Haraway 1988), post-positivist realist identity theory (Moya 2002), and the epistemic value of experience (Scott 1991) in order to claim feminist testimonio as a methodology that articulates macrosocial critiques in microsocial, affective registers through the avenue of marginal experience narratives in order to produce more complex, less false social knowledge.

Section Three: “Activist Deployments of a Writing Project at Work: Polyvocality, Pedagogy, and Praxis in Collaborative Feminist Testimonio” engages the dialogic methods and rhetorical practices that feminist activist polyvocal testimonios utilize to stage their political interventions. It articulates how feminist collaborative activist testimonios at once embody and enact their political visions, and in so doing present themselves as partial methodological blueprints for social action.

Section Four: “Feminist Testimonio as Narrative Framework: Testifying to the Politics of the Imagined” articulates how and why feminist literary authors translate

historical events into the realm of fiction. It argues that the self-conscious use of testimonio as a narrative framework—positioning the reader as witness to a fictional narrative testifier—undermines a mindless, capitalist consumption of politically motivated literary texts by replacing a unidirectional model of entertainment with a bidirectional social pact.

Section Five: “Translating Worlds: Edwidge Danticat and Feminist Testimonio in the Haitian Context” supplements the comparativist model of previous chapters with a geopolitically rooted discussion to attend to the multiple genres Danticat utilizes to produce historically grounded literature that testifies to the cultural vitality of Haitian and Haitian-American women in the face of colonial legacies and neocolonial conditions.

My Postscript: “Forging Cross-Border Reading Alliances: One Reader’s Perspective” situates my earlier claims through a first-person narrative to model how the life writing practices employed by feminist testimonio have shaped my politics, interpretive practices, writing, and beingness in the world.

***Section One: Situating Testimonio: A Spirit of Resilience in Textual Form***

“[W]hen the times changed, you changed too...That’s *teknik*, craftiness.”

~Vita Telcy, *Walking on Fire*

Testimonio is a genre at work. As a variant of what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls “Third World literary discourse,” testimonio “claims not exactly an “art for the masses,” but an “art for the people, by the people, and from the people” (252). Trinh’s words importantly highlight how the principles and functions of Latin American testimonio more broadly correspond with first-person plural social justice writing projects in their differing contexts, struggles, and forms. As such, this section calls for a more expansive

understanding of testimonio that transcends specific formal qualities and trades in a definition of what it *is* for *what it does and why*. Beyond its classification as a genre in which a member(s) of an oppressed group attempts to convey an urgent social problem, testimonio offers a sustained situational analysis of how larger power structures are felt and experienced at the level of marginalized social actors.

Testimonio therefore offers one particular way, or *methodology*, of telling a story about how the social landscape actively shapes and affects the personal lives at the center of a narrative account. More so than a laundry list of narrative must-haves, and while individual goals necessarily vary, what unites testimonio is a shared commitment: a utilization of first-person plural narratives to relay a macro social critique in a micro social, affective register. As a culturally resistant writing project, testimonio recognizes creative writing as an integral component to social justice projects. It acknowledges that change does begin with attitudinal shifts, and inspires its readers to begin these processes of attitudinal adjustment and to open up to the possibility of a more just world. As such, testimonio is nothing less than a hybrid textual praxis for those who use the written word as cultural weapons to re-arrange and alter well-worn bourgeois narratives and replace them with radical social visions of justice for all. In this way, testimonio is a spirit of resilience in textual form; it embodies the creativity and ingenuity of social actors who hold little formal power and yet who actively reject a vision of themselves as powerless.

Testimonio is not for doctrinaires. It provides no easy, formulaic solutions; it offers instead partial truths and the articulation of complex realities. It rejects all “pure” political or aesthetic platforms in favor of a tactical approach. It breaks its own rules in

an effort to resist categorical stasis and confounds those who seek to bind it with ready-made definitions. Testimonio is therefore necessarily flexible; its varied forms and functions mirror the resourcefulness of its writers and make it suitable to take the shape of divergent textual forms and articulate a diverse array of liberatory platforms. Caren Kaplan has aptly identified testimonio as an “out-law genre,” one that “enables a deconstruction of the ‘master’ genres, revealing the power dynamics embedded in literary production, distribution, and reception” (208). As such, it resonates with sustained efforts by marginalized social groups to hybridize modes of autobiographical telling to decolonize these writing forms from the inside out. And yet, in its enactment of a hybrid textual politics, it distinguishes itself from other writing initiatives; it is “a project of social justice in which text is an instrument” (Nance 19).

I argue that the current proliferation and diversification of testimonio projects exemplifies one manifestation of what Chela Sandoval terms “the methodology of the oppressed,” defined as a “process of taking and using whatever is necessary and available in order to negotiate, confront, or speak to power—and then moving on to new forms, expression, and ethos when necessary” (28). Rooted in the “technologies of semiotic reading, deconstruction of signs, meta-ideologizing, differential movement, and moral commitment to equality” (180), Sandoval argues it is precisely this shifting quality that enables the methodology of the oppressed to resist rigid ideological identification and fosters its revolutionary potential. Testimonio’s insistence on navigating treacherous North/South divides and trafficking in dominant paradigms not only attests to a fierce insistence on a bidirectionality of power espoused by differential consciousness, but also

to an unflinching resolve to utilize dominant circuits to “speak to power.” Sandoval’s paradigm seems particularly suited to contribute to a more flexible notion of testimonio given her self-stated goal to the end “disciplinary apartheid” that prevents parallel sociopolitical projects and theories from speaking to each other.

Because of a general unfamiliarity with testimonio as a recognizable form of life writing, however, this section steps back from this expansive understanding of testimonio to work closely with the scholarship that has served to define this writing project as a distinct, identifiable writing form. I therefore momentarily turn attention away from the interdisciplinary field of Feminist Studies in order to primarily address the fields of Latin American and Autobiography Studies. I do so not only to further articulate what is politically at stake in Menchú claiming her book as testimonio rather than autobiography, but to more broadly address how the disciplinary containment of testimonio as a pre-established genre with fixed narrative conventions devalues the political interventions of more experimental, hybrid testimonios, of which polyvocal feminist testimonios form a part.

In fact, this section argues that we would do well to rid ourselves of the notion of testimonio as a “genre” altogether. I instead argue for understanding testimonio as a political ethos, and as a life writing project in the service of social justice efforts. It is my contention that such a conceptual reframing positions us to better understand why and how its modes of narrative address are necessarily flexible in order to best suit the needs of its practitioners and to most effectively intervene in the dominant discourses of their place-based contexts. Thus, while autobiography and testimonio do have key moments

of overlap, the section works to highlight the crucial differences in why and how they theorize subjectivity and their differing relations to dominant power structures. It identifies the modes of narrative address that define these differences while working towards a more expansive understanding of testimonio as a political ethos that recognizes creative writing efforts as a crucial component of social justice platforms. This section ultimately identifies testimonio as its own form of (grounded) theorizing, and suggests we must walk through its scaffolding to form a mode of criticism that adequately theorizes *through* testimonio rather than making idle conjectures upon it from our arbitrary disciplinary locations. It is from here that I chart a preliminary understanding of “feminist polyvocal testimonio” with which the remainder of my project engages.

## **Chapter One: Reframing Testimonio: From Narrative ‘Genre’ to Political ‘Ethos’**

### *How Has Testimonio Been Defined?*

Testimonio “proper” has been deemed the quintessential example of resistance literature.<sup>7</sup> Any account of this writing form must therefore simultaneously address its formal structural qualities and unflinching political vision. Recognized as a distinct literary genre in Latin America since at least the 1970’s,<sup>8</sup> testimonio is a hybrid form of writing that blurs the boundaries of politics-narrative, fact-fiction, individual-collective, and as such, defies normative literary classification. As an alternative to autobiography, testimonios offer a way of seeing the communal in the private and allow its authors to assert knowledge claims and articulate political visions on behalf of their social groups without sacrificing the specificities of individual lived experiences. With a definitive

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<sup>7</sup> See Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature*.

<sup>8</sup> This recognition was substantiated by Cuba’s Havana Casa de las Americas publishing house adding a separate literary prize category for testimonio in 1970.

pedagogical impetus, the writing of testimonios serves to provide a historical archive as seen “from below” and depends upon a witness/listener in its purpose and form. By holding the reader accountable, testimonio makes a cross-border readership a vital part of the process in gaining recognition for the lives of marginalized people and their stories, often by prompting the reader to take direct political action in solidarity with their cause while simultaneously refusing full access to the lives it narrates.

One of the most important political and stylistic aspects of testimonio is its hybrid positioning that allows it to effectively confound several binaries that maintain cultural currency in western epistemes. As argued by Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith in “Feminism and Cultural Memory,” the counternarratives that unfold within the framework of testimonio “emerge out of a complex dynamic between past and present, individual and collective, public and private, recall and forgetting, power and powerlessness, history and myth, trauma and nostalgia, conscious and unconscious fear or desires” (5). Testimonio’s paradoxical qualities force it to maintain a between-worlds space: it confronts macrosocial flows of power through the telling of intimate, microsocial details of people’s daily lives; it disrupts sequential temporality by insisting on the co-existence of the past and present; it utilizes personal experience to sharpen an understanding of collective histories. The project of testimonio is thus a “product of fragmentary personal and collective experiences . . . at the juncture of where the individual and the social come together, where the person is called on to illustrate the social formation in its heterogeneity and complexity” (Hirsch and Smith 6-7). This push-pull between the individual and the collective, fact and fiction, the microcosm and the

macrocosm, has also led testimonio to occupy the periphery of normative literary classification, having been referred to as “socioliterary” (Nance 18), “extraliterary” (Beverley 42), “antiliterary” (Beverley 42), and as an “out-law genre” (Kaplan 208).

While definitions of testimonio abound, one of its now classic descriptions is articulated in Latin American literary critic John Beverley’s landmark “The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio*,” in which it is defined as “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” (92-93). Precisely because many scholars have come to identify testimonio as a genre that “gives voice” to the (presumed illiterate) subaltern through the mediation of an editor, anthropologist, or other intermediary, Linda Maier’s extended definition in “The Case for and Case History of Women’s Testimonial Literature in Latin America,” importantly highlights how “mediated” testimonio is only one possible form. Maier productively expands the definition to include works narrated by a person who belongs to an “oppressed, excluded, and/or marginal group and who speaks/writes as a member of that group” through which the individual “I” becomes responsible for representing the experience(s) of the “we” (5). Although Maier defines this variation as “direct” or “eyewitness” testimony (6), in several instances testimonios are written by “eyewitness” authors who also partake in “mediated” forms of testimony by placing their own experiences in dialogue with experiences of those who relatively share their social positionality and/or set of experiences.

Regardless of whether the narrator is the direct or indirect author of a given testimonio, its political intentionality is definitive, and “has to involve an urgency to communicate a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival” (Beverley 94). Broadly speaking, testimonio is concerned “with a problematic collective social situation in which the narrator lives” (Beverley 95). It is this focus on the collective that separates testimonio from other forms of life writing,<sup>9</sup> wherein the collective ethos of testimonio importantly serves to de-center western epistemologies that privilege the rigid individualism of the Enlightenment “I.” This point is also made by Hirsch and Smith who assert that while such narratives “represent individual identity as shaped by membership in one or several groups,” they nevertheless focus on a “singular story [so that] they can better highlight difference and particularity of context, eschewing generalizing and homogenizing tendencies of identity politics” (7). As such, the individual “I” referent within the narrative frame is a rhetorical device to organize the composite experiences of members of a social group into an integrated narrative account.

The use of first person plural, or an “I” that is “we,” works to evoke “an absent polyphony of other voices” (Beverley 34), leading this formulation to heavily rely on metonymy.<sup>10</sup> Because the “I” is held in close tension with the “we,” it is used to relay the typicality, rather than uniqueness, of a situation. In this configuration, the narrative-I occupies a paradoxical position in which it simultaneously does and does not position

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<sup>9</sup> See Leigh Gilmore’s *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* for an in-depth discussion on how testimonio has successfully challenged, co-opted, and appropriated the form from its Enlightenment roots.

<sup>10</sup> Metonymy is a form of narrative substitution in which one object comes to stand in symbolically for other objects that it is relationally connected to.

itself as a paradigmatic life (Spivak “Three Women’s Texts” 9).<sup>11</sup> While use of the first person plural disrupts individualist logic, it also does not completely abandon the notion of the individual. Rather, the use of first person plural as the narrative referent “constitutes an affirmation of the individual self in collective mode” (Beverley 35). As it grounds itself in the particularities of an individual’s life experiences, testimonio simultaneously recognizes the power of aggregate accounts to broaden its extent of social significance.

For instance, in *A Single, Numberless Death (Una Sola Muerte Numerosa)* the author, Nora Strejilevich, attests to the disappearance of a particular political prisoner: “There seemed to be no one around when they plucked her from the bus and shoved her into the car. Same old story. In broad daylight, in the middle of downtown, in the bloom of her youth. Only in Olga’s case, the one they wanted to pluck from the bus was me” (93). The narrator’s account, conveyed in an off-handed, matter-of-fact tone, calls attention to the pervasiveness of military disappearances during the Dirty War in Argentina, attesting to how an individual account is meaningless without also understanding it in relation to the “we.” While the narrator is careful to name Olga and to testify to her individual story, the simultaneous tactical narrative normalization of the atrocity reminds the reader that there were many Olgas, each with their own account; accounts that eerily mirror each other in detail.

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<sup>11</sup> As an interesting counterpoint, Sylvia Molloy’s *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America* argues that Latin American autobiography does claim itself as representing a paradigmatic life, thus further highlighting the representational differences between testimonio and autobiography even within the Latin American context.

There are also testimonios that reject the use of metonymy, and replace this first person plural effect with a polyphonic splicing and interweaving of different narrative accounts. This “intercutting” of voices allows for speakers to remain individuals while also being a part of a collective chorus (Schaffer and Smith 177). Within this polyvocal structure, several narrators occupy the text, sometimes named and sometimes anonymous, often conveying contradictory social information. The effect is a collective resonance in which polyvocal testimonios explicitly position culture as a contested terrain while highlighting how the similarities and divergences between individual accounts enables a three-dimensional understanding of sociohistorical conditions in a situated context.

In such works, individual narratives become meaningless without grappling with the overlaps and departures between them. This is especially true when differently positioned speakers relay conflicting and contradictory accounts of the same events. Through heterogeneity of experience, fragmented truth claims subtly emerge, claims that then need to be pieced together and worked through in order for epistemic wholeness to more thoroughly materialize. This form of testimonio is not interested in providing ready-made solutions or unproblematized truth claims, and most directly correlates to Kimberly Nance’s description of “deliberative” testimonio in which hesitations and contradictions are rhetorically employed to comment on the limits of memory to convey social knowledge (32).

Polyvocal testimonio therefore offers itself as a “contradictory assemblage” (Schaffer and Smith 80), akin to a politics of difference that nevertheless allows for an

overarching common story to emerge through accumulation; truth through repetition (Schaffer and Smith 45; 177). Such polyvocal frameworks interrupt narrow reader assumptions of testimonio providing a documentarian, unadulterated access to “truth” (as evidenced by the Menchú controversy) by highlighting the possibility of coexisting social truths, and the situated nature of knowledge production (taken up at length in Section Two).

Regardless of whether a specific testimonio employs a first person plural framework or a polyphonic framework, Bakhtin’s notion of discursive heteroglossia certainly applies to the writing form. In Irene Matthews’ “Translating/Transgressing/Torture . . .” she suggests the polyphonic resonance of all forms of testimonio can be understood as initiating a “heterobiographical pact” that allows for the “exist[ence] of multiple personas as well as multiple narrative-points-of-view in the final product” (92). As an act of cultural resistance, testimonio has proven itself a useful tool in disrupting simplistic representations of the Global South in which cultures are all too often positioned as static, unchanging, and monolithic.

Finally, it is central to note that testimonio is a fundamentally pedagogical writing project, through its insistence on confronting a socially privileged, first world audience with a situated analysis of oppression in the Global South and to instigate its northern readership to a point of action. Traditionally, as a textual component of a larger social justice project, this has provided the justification of its labors. Its “success” has been identified through actualized social change (Nance 13). While my own work seeks to complicate this reductive understanding of the political possibilities engendered by the

testimonial pact, the paradigm of witnessing remains useful for highlighting how testimonio evokes a sense of social responsibility from its readership, and for altering what could be a mindless consumption of their work (read as unidirectional entertainment) into a relationship in which the reader feels an obligation to act in solidarity (read as bidirectional social pact).

These are the standard qualities of testimonio that have been typically addressed by Latin American literary critics. But critics within Autobiography Studies also have a particular investment in understanding the structural components of testimonio. As my discussion of the Menchú controversy gestures towards, the lines between “autobiography” and “testimonio” are fluid, yet fraught, causing academics great discomfort when charting the literary and political terrain that (dis)joins them.

*Challenging the Dominance of Liberal Autobiography Through Testimonio: Questions of Audience and Address*

While critics such as John Beverley have asserted that autobiography and testimonio are not one in the same, others such as Doris Sommer have in turn argued that they be understood as “contiguous categories” (110). Such ambivalence articulates how autobiography and testimonio are at once “sister” forms of life narrative and overtly antagonistic to each other’s core representational principles. They must be considered relationally—not only in aesthetic terms but in political ones as well—but despite their dialectical relationship, they do not maintain equal recognition or ideological value. This has become especially clear to me as an academic in the North American academy. In introducing my work on feminist testimonio, I often find myself needing to explain it to those unfamiliar with it as “inverted autobiography.” If autobiography shines the

spotlight on the narrated self, I suggest, then testimonio shines a spotlight on the heterogeneous social conditions that have *produced* the narrated-I; the narrative “I” is thus always already a part of a collective. Ironically, in the act of making my project intelligible to those unfamiliar with testimonio I discursively reenact a form of epistemic violence, defining testimonio in terms of its more recognizable variation, the autobiography, thereby reinstating its privileged position as the dominant form of life writing.

As coexistent forms of life writing, autobiography and testimonio both call upon personal memory as their “primary archival source” (Smith and Watson 7). However, as argued by Smith and Watson in *Reading Autobiography*, “there are crucial distinctions in *how* these forms narrate a life” (5). As the recent turn in Autobiography Studies shows, all autobiographical telling involves varying degrees of narrative performativity as authors create a narrative self through an intentional shaping of congregate life experiences, regardless of a text’s attempts at concealing its own artifice (Smith and Watson 61). Through their conveyance of “real” life events, all forms of life writing are also rife with “oral residue,” through the translation of verbal happenings into a written mode (Smith and Watson 76). More so than structural discrepancies, however, it is their relationship with their readers that differs most: “life narrators address readers whom they want to persuade of their version of experience” (Smith and Watson 7). It is therefore *how* and *what* they tell and *for what purpose* that differentiates one form of life writing from the next.

One common way of imagining the relationship between these two forms of life writing has been to categorize testimonio as a marginal variant, or subset, of “true” autobiography. However, as the Menchú controversy crystallized, this formulation privileges a particular way of conveying a life story; namely western bourgeois tales of individualism and upward mobility. While such a configuration recognizes their dialectical relationship, it refuses to bestow them with equal recognition or ideological value. It is inarguable that Autobiography Studies has often rooted itself firmly in the western writing tradition, specifically connecting its cultural production to an Enlightenment lineage of liberal individualism. One of the most readily available and recognizable forms of autobiography is the *bildungsroman*, or novel of development, in which a protagonist undergoes a professional and/or personal journey that oft equates to social and economic upward mobility (epitomized by *The Autobiography of Ben Franklin*).<sup>12</sup>

This easily recognizable format hails its debt to Enlightenment values in its privileging of a rags to riches, self-made ethos that attributes the protagonist’s success to his reliance on rationality and individual ingenuity. My masculine encoding of the protagonist is not incidental. The very social assumptions and progressions that underpin what was long thought to be a “universal” plot structure have until recently excluded female protagonists from its imagined world, since socially mobile, upper class women were long confined to the domestic, and the limited social mobility amongst poor women

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to realize that even though it was in the fictional realm of the novel that the plot structure the *bildungsroman* was employed, its plot formula was quickly integrated into autobiographical accounts. It is therefore not surprising that postcolonial feminist literary writers who self-consciously fictionalize their life narratives frequently utilize adaptations of the *bildungsroman* to do so.

disqualified their life stories from its narrative trajectory despite their definitive presence in the public sphere. Diverse racial and geopolitical positionalities among women further explicate why the *bildungsroman* has not historically been a genre hospitable to translating the trajectory of women's lives into textual form. As Smith and Watson aptly note, while the twentieth century has indeed given rise to a number of female *bildungsromans* (Nawal al Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*), these adaptations have often inverted the canonical trajectory of the genre by highlighting women's limited opportunities for social mobility, while also taking liberties to fictionalize biographically true events (Smith and Watson 120).<sup>13</sup>

While Enlightenment thought has undoubtedly shaped certain strands of life writing, such critical interventions by women writers signal that autobiography neither began nor need end with this sociohistorical phenomenon. As argued by Smith and Watson, "The focus of self-referential narratives [in Autobiography Studies] as narratives of autonomous individuality and representative lives narrowed the range of vision to the West . . . But if we recall the diverse modes of life narrating by marginalized, minoritized, diasporic, nomadic, and postcolonial subjects through the history of life writing, the focus on liberal individuality as both the motive and achievement of autobiographical writing is insufficient as a determining force" (203). Rather, we would

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<sup>13</sup> Contemporary postcolonial uses of the *bildungsroman* by women writers also complicate its reliance on a sole protagonist in favor of exploring the importance of intergenerational relationships between women, and replace the trope of economic and social mobility with a coming-to-consciousness model in which these re-worked *bildungsromans* become "a site of both reproduction of the individualist plot of development and the interruption of its troubling norms" (*Reading Autobiography* 129).

do well to question the very intactness of “autobiography” as a readily defined literary category, or as a writing form with internally consistent literary identifiers and rules.

Smith’s and Watson’s publication *Reading Autobiography* therefore signifies an important shift in Autobiography Studies in its reframing of “autobiography” from a single genre to a more pluralized understanding of a range of autobiographical *acts*.<sup>14</sup> In their formulation, autobiography becomes not so much a monolithic literary genre, as “a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present” (1). Smith and Watson attribute their reformulation to “many postmodern and postcolonial theorists [who] contend that the term autobiography is inadequate to describe the extensive historical range and the diverse genres and practices not only in the West but around the globe” (3). In paying homage to the numerous feminist and postcolonial critics who have in recent years sought to destabilize the understanding of autobiography as a singular and geopolitically specific phenomenon—one that has enabled all autobiographical acts lying outside of the culturally imagined “west” to be read as mere copies of a “civilized” original—Smith and Watson destabilize the hegemony of the term “autobiography” by replacing and offsetting it with “life narrative,” understood as “an umbrella term that encompasses the extensive array and diverse modes of personal storytelling that takes experiential history as its starting point” (7). Within their paradigm life narrative is further broken down into “life writing” and other artistic mediums that engage with autobiographic acts in an effort to highlight the range of forms and functions involved in self-referential cultural productions.

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<sup>14</sup> Leigh Gilmore’s *The Limits of Autobiography and Autobiographics* also calls for the range of autobiographical forms to be understood as interrelated forms of life writing rather than as marginal offshoots.

Smith's and Watson's discursive refinement enables us to re-enter the question of the relationship between autobiography and testimonio whereby reconfiguring "autobiography" into the less over determined "life writing" allows us to see how it has never been as stable a category as it would seem. Instead, Smith and Watson posit "life writing" as a mainframe for understanding heterogeneous ways of expressing embodied subjectivity in an array of dimensions (geopolitical, sociohistorical, gendered, racialized, sexual, among others). This destabilization brings into view a web of interconnecting modes of self-referential speech acts that are not ranked on a hierarchical scale of ideological value. Smith and Watson's life writing paradigm necessarily extends relevance to a number of hybrid autobiographical texts while de-privileging "the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story as the definitive achievement of life writing" (Smith and Watson 3).

Understanding life writing as a set of diverse self-representational practices not only gives due credit to the plurality of life writing forms in existence, it also positions critics to better see where and how various strands of self-writing *overlap*. As Smith and Watson argue, while we might characterize a particular piece of life writing as autobiographical *bildungsroman*, it might simultaneously exhibit qualities of testimonio and ethnography. In other words, all autobiographical acts engage with hybrid strategies and rhetorics, so that while different modes of address are understood to be dominant in specific strands of life writing, they are often employed *in combination* with defining characteristics of another.

This “polyglot” effect (Behar 17) is of critical importance to my own project since only one of my primary texts self-consciously refers to itself as “feminist testimonio.”<sup>15</sup> The feminist life writing projects with which I engage are rather alternately referred to as (traditional) testimonio, postcolonial *bildungsroman*, historical novel, (auto)ethnography, and/or life history. While these descriptors are no doubt useful for literary critics’ categorization purposes, an unfortunate common effect is to cultivate a “one or the other” mentality that downplays the interconnections between different modes of life writing, thus stifling productive conversations across textual forms. Smith and Watson’s call for a both/and approach that acknowledges how forms of life writing simultaneously span several sub-categories is especially useful to my own project that utilizes the discursive category of feminist testimonio as an enjoining descriptor to yoke together seemingly formally distinct texts under a common lens. It provides a means of bringing them into co-conversation in order to identify emerging patterns that remain sublimated when read through the lens of normatively assigned genre categories.

It is also important to note that Smith and Watson do not entirely reject genre categorization. Rather, they reconfigure how we make sense of the overlaps between genres. Smith’s and Watson’s more expansive framework for understanding self-representational practices therefore does still depend upon making distinctions between “*how* these forms narrate a life” (5) in order to better understand their intertextual elements. With this in mind, I argue that testimonio and what I will from here on out refer to as “liberal autobiography” be understood as two interrelated modes of life writing that at once parallel and problematize each other.

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<sup>15</sup> Here I refer to The Latina Feminist Group’s *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*.

Beyond shared core traits of life writing, one of the defining characteristics between autobiography and testimonio is in *how they imagine subjectivity*. As suggested by Doris Sommer, testimonial literature is centrally preoccupied with relationships (120). These relationships vary in scale and scope and include exposing interlocking social systems of power by conceptually linking public and private, self and collective, past and future. Testimonio's focus on relationships also, importantly, extends to its framing of the subject(s) at the center of the account. While traditional liberal autobiographical accounts frame their protagonist as an unique, exemplary, and atypical figure, in testimonio it is the overwhelming *typicality* of the speaker that is definitive (Sommer 107). Testimonio's depiction of an unexceptional (which is not to say noncomplex) character is of crucial importance to reminding its readership that the speaker is addressing a collective social problem in which his or her own experiences are not unique. In this sense, testimonio is profoundly democratic in a way that liberal autobiography can never be and this is what makes it such a powerful intervention in the dominant terrain of knowledge production. By embodying the radical notion that any "I" is worthy of playing a central role in the portrayal of a complex, problematic self (Beverley 34), and thus strongly resonating with Avery Gordon's notion of "complex personhood" (4), testimonio actively writes against the romanticized and oversimplified representations of marginalized people's lives.

Another invaluable differentiation between these modes of life writing is how liberal autobiography and testimonios *use* experience. While experience within liberal autobiography is utilized to achieve personal resonance, to define the personality traits of

the narrator in order to sharpen a depiction of their character strengths and weaknesses, the use of experience in testimonio achieves an impersonal effect (Sommer 109). Whereas the “self” is the defining subject matter in liberal autobiography, in testimonio, the self is called upon to bring attention to the collective social situation in which the speaker is located. That is, in testimonio, the use of personal experience becomes a *vehicle*, rather than point of focus, as personal experience is called upon to convey larger social truths.

This impersonal bent in testimonio is derived from the fact that “we,” as readers, are not encouraged to self-identify with the speaker (Sommer 108). Rather, as a writing form that anticipates substantial power differentials between the speaker and reader of the text, identification is discouraged, and possibly dangerous. As Beverley argues, “[a]utobiography produces in the reader . . . the specular effect of confirming and authorizing his or (less so) her situation of relative social privilege. Testimonio, by contrast . . . always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability of the reader’s world must be brought into question” (Beverley 41). By actively positioning readers as interpretive outsiders, a reader’s authority to judge the text, or whether we have the appropriate knowledge and experience with which to do so, is questioned.

The gaze of the narrated-I also differs between these writing forms. If what defines one form of life writing from another is *whom* life narrators wish to address and *why*, then the ways in which they direct their readership’s gaze cannot be overlooked. It is through the central narrator’s eyes that we enter a text’s imaginary world, and so where they are looking determines what we are able to see. Whereas memoir directs attention to

the people and events surrounding the narrator (Smith and Watson 274), liberal autobiography attempts to depict a rich inner life of its main character by including internal ruminations and pondering life events. Though different methods, the ultimate effect of both framings is to keep attention focused on the autonomous individual at the center of the narrative; the “I” is the centerpiece of the text, it is the “I” that provides the narrative with internal coherence. In contrast, even as testimonio uses the life trajectory of its narrator(s) to affectively appeal to its readership, it always encourages its readers to look outward and around—beyond, behind, below, and above the main speaker—to understand how their lives fit into the larger social landscape. In this formulation, the narrator is positioned as the *relayer* of the textual message, rather than its embodiment.

Finally, it is the *intentionality* driving each form of life writing that most starkly brings liberal autobiography and testimonio into sharp contrast. While all narratives are necessarily pedagogical, of the two it is only testimonio that is deliberately so. In its appeal to pathos it invites the reader to become affectively cognizant of a specific instance of social injustice, doing its best to awaken them from complicity. Testimonio is therefore better understood as a “project of social justice in which text is an instrument” rather than as a self-contained work (Nance 19). While liberal autobiography ultimately serves as a form of entertainment, in which the reader is openly invited to consume and absorb the narrator’s story for one’s own purposes, the rhetorical framing of testimonio refuses to allow the reader to forget the social urgency propelling the penning of the text. True to its namesake, testimonio addresses witnesses, not just a readership. The very nature of the testifier-witness dialectic suggests a reciprocal social pact, an ethical

engagement of two consensual parties, to “bear witness” to a social truth. While the testifier might gain closure through the telling of the narrative, responsibility is in turn shifted onto the witness to act justly in the face of this social information. While this is widely recognized as a defining characteristic of testimonio, its actual ability to effectively agitate readers in the Global North is still questioned, and is one of the central debates addressed in the following section.

### *Reviewing Central Debates in Testimonio Criticism*

Regardless of whether testimonio is being discussed between Latin American literary critics, in Autobiography Studies, or in the context of human rights, there are four main debates that overwhelmingly frame the critical discussions of this writing project: *Where does it fit? Does it work? Does it destabilize or reinforce Global North/South power differentials? Is the moment of testimonio over?* In practice, these questions are necessarily interconnected and overlapping, each one nuanced and multi-faceted. For instance, concern over testimonio’s effectiveness correlates with whether its social relevance as a writing form has passed. Questions of its efficacy as a writing form are also intimately entwined with concern over whether the asymmetrical power relations between (subaltern) writer and (first-world) reader ultimately contains its political potential. Likewise, concern with whether it destabilizes or reinforces power differentials between the Global North and South is simultaneously manifest in interrogations of the global publishing market, a text’s interest in speaking across differently positioned reading audiences, the relationship between subaltern speaker and mediator (as editor, translator, or collaborator), and first world writer and reader, in addition to the particular

tropes and storylines (liberal, humanist, Christian) that testimonios employ to affectively appeal to a Northern readership. Below I provide a brief summary of the various lines of inquiry fueling these questions as well as suggestions for reframing these debates to open up more probing questions in an effort to not only satisfy critics' curiosity with the writing project, but to also make testimonio scholarship more relevant to testimonio's practitioners themselves.

*"Where Does it Fit?"*

This question is frequently asked in terms of which academic discipline testimonio "belongs" to. As a hybrid writing form, testimonio does not easily fit into any one disciplinary category, but rather straddles several simultaneously, exacerbating scholars who wish to pin it down: "By establishing an explicit interplay between factual and fictional, between aesthetic aspirations to literariness and scientific claims to objectivity, *testimonio* has consistently defied the critics by departure from a traditional system of assumptions about truth and falsity, history and fact, science and literature" (Skłodowska 85). Traditional criticism on testimonio has thus attempted to categorize and contain it rather than open itself to the possibilities it engenders. For instance, while literary critics argue that it is too "sociological" (i.e. documentarian) to be literature, anthropologists and sociologists argue it is too "literary" (i.e. aesthetically polished) to be understood as ethnography, furthering the validity of understanding it as a "socioliterary" genre (Nance 18). Comprehensively, these debates tell us more about the assumptions of disciplinary departments than about the works themselves. These articulated disciplinary anxieties more broadly point to how testimonio disrupts imposed methodological divides

established between literary analysis and social science inquiry, and highlight why we need interdisciplinary modes of analysis to productively understand this writing form.

In recent years, interdisciplinary scholars have made attempts to “undo” these territory wars by grappling with central assumptions and arbitrary rules espoused by each department. For instance, in reviewing the ethnographic process that led Ruth Behar to write *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story*, she describes how she came to refer to the book as an account of Esperanza’s *historia*, a Spanish word used by Esperanza that spoke to the twofold nature of the narrative account: a life history and a life story (16). Behar contextualizes her use of this Spanish word to describe the text, arguing that because of the separation of history and literature departments in the nineteenth century academy, there is no English word that allows Esperanza’s account to be properly translated as simultaneously historically true and fictional (16).

Similarly, sociologist Avery Gordon documents her own experience with the disciplinary panic she was confronted with in relation to her work in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, suggesting that as a “mode of storytelling, sociology distinguishes itself from literature by its now historical claim to find and report the facts expertly” (25). Gordon questions this clear cut division, however, arguing that sociological accounts can be understood “as fictions of the real” (11), while simultaneously arguing that “fiction is getting pretty close to sociology” (37). While Behar’s and Gordon’s arguments more broadly contemplate the fictional lines constructed between the disciplines of literature, history, and the social sciences, their efforts speak to the need to undo disciplinary-specific methodological assumptions that

severely limit how hybrid writing projects such as testimonio are engaged with in the northern academy.

But critics asking or answering the question “where does it fit?” do not always serve to reinforce disciplinary divides. At times, the question has been used to ask the more radical question of why testimonio came into existence in the first place. For instance, to establish a framework for understanding testimonio as its own writing form rather than as a marginal variant of autobiography, John Beverley began by asking, “[a]re there experiences in the world today that would be betrayed or misrepresented by the forms of literature as we know it?” (29). Insofar as testimonio disobeys disciplinary containment, I propose that it can and should be engaged in a number of (anti)disciplinary locations, each asking different question sets in an effort to explain why testimonio has become a chosen vehicle for naming and contesting the ways in which globalization, development projects, capitalism, and resulting diasporic displacements affect marginalized social actors, and how the varied forms of testimonio correspond with differences in goals and situation. Most importantly, criticism on testimonio must recognize that “writing as a social function—as differentiated from the ideal of art for art’s sake—is the aim that Third World writers, in defining their roles highly esteem and claim” (Minh-ha 249).

*“Does it Work?”*

This question inquires about the efficacy of the genre to deliver on its promise of social change. As stated, part of the social pact performed in foundational Latin

American testimonio narratives<sup>16</sup> was intended to instigate the reader to a point of direct political action. In the social landscape of dictatorships and *los desaparecidos*, struggles for land rights and indigenous recognition, this defined goal and purpose makes sense. By providing narratives that collectively produce a counterhistory, authors of testimonio were (and are) able to document tangible injustices that a government has committed against its citizens. And yet when the political promise of testimonio did not immediately deliver, when it did not yield a global citizenship knocking down the doors of corrupt governments, corporations, and gendered, racialized class structures, testimonio was prematurely deemed a failed political project.

Ironically, the questioning of testimonio's efficacy was articulated by literary critics rather than those employing testimonio as a textual tool in grounded political struggle.<sup>17</sup> As outlined by Nance, "In the sixties, seventies, and early eighties, victory had been declared as new voices contested oppressive governments' official stories. In the ensuing decade, the euphoria faded, and with the end of the past century came a spate of books in which critics of all political stripes expressed a general suspicion of motives and a profound pessimism regarding the genre's social possibilities . . . many critics have come to speak of the testimonial moment in past tense" (5).

It is not that questioning its effectiveness is problematic in and of itself; self-critique is essential to its successful utilization if social justice projects continue to draw

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<sup>16</sup> Menchú, Rigoberta. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Trans. Ann Wright. New York: Verso, 1984; Chungara, Domitila B. de. *Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*. Trans. Victoria Ortiz. London: Monthly Review Press, 1979.

<sup>17</sup> Gugelburger, Georg M. (ed.). *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996; *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*. Ed. Arturo Arias. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

upon it as a textual strategy. But as Nance argues, “[i]f dreams that testimonio by itself could end oppression were misguided, so too are assertions of literature’s definitive inefficacy” (160). Too often, its critics have measured the genre’s success in the “legitimized” forms of strikes, boycotts, and armed revolutions, discounting the contribution of modes of cultural resistance to play a formative role in resistant political action. In prioritizing these forms of resistance to the exclusion of more incremental, less measurable forms of social change, its critics have overlooked what literature is uniquely positioned to offer social justice projects.

The strength of literature lays in its affective resonance, its ability to momentarily de-center the reader and enable them to imaginatively occupy another subject position, and accompanying worldview, for the duration of the book. Thus, while the effects of purposefully employed affect are intangible and evasive, they are no less real. They may not lead to clear cut change in the world, but in a/effectively connecting with readers one by one, literature allows for an *attitudinal* change in the reader’s worldview, understood as a gradual consciousness raising, that may not have taken place had the reader not picked up the book. Nance reinforces the importance of recognizing the long-term effects of attitudinal shifts—an event that might be marked by passing along the book to a friend if not by attending a political rally—which might not elicit immediate social change, but nevertheless contribute to an eventual change in interpretive perspective, which is a necessary precursor of direct action. Indeed, as the testimonial ethos pervades the life writing market, each published text becomes a new opportunity to radically alter a reader’s worldview.

Precisely because testimonio continues to be a chosen vehicle for activist groups from the Global South to articulate social problems and affectively connect with cross-border readerships, I suggest we need to reframe the question of “does it work?” to “why and how does it work?” Practitioners of testimonio are not so naïve nor impatient as to expect immediate social change. Rather, insofar as social change is simultaneously an unpredictable and gradual process, testimonio is utilized as a resistant cultural tool to garner affective resonance in order to establish cross-border reading alliances that may eventually lead to transformative social change. In this way, testimonio attests to the need for multi-dimensional modes of resistance that take aim at different sociopolitical registers. As Schaffer and Smith argue, “while such narrative acts and readings are not sufficient ground for social change, they are a necessary ground” (226).

*Does Testimonio Destabilize or Reinforce Global North/South Divides?*

This question engages with a complex politics of reception at a series of levels and in which testimonio is entrenched in a particular way. Of the four main academic debates, this holds the most potential relevance for critics and practitioners of testimonio alike and is the one with which my project most directly intervenes. As a medium that places subaltern speakers in critical proximity with socially privileged reading audiences, the power differentials between reader and text cannot be denied and are central to how testimonio is both written and interpreted. While testimonio was initially heralded as a savior genre capable of seamlessly bridging North/South divides, this overly optimistic description of the genre was set up to disappoint, as well illustrated by the Menchú incident. Nevertheless, there remain several non-textual factors that precede the relationship of reader and text and that need be considered in relation to this question,

including the relationships between testimonio's speakers and its editors, translators, and collaborators, and the conditions through which it gains currency as a profitable commodity in the publishing market.

As Schaffer and Smith argue, life writing is at an all time high. While this is exciting for life writers, this popularity grants publishers and audiences much control over which stories can be told:

Life narratives have become saleable properties in today's markets. They gain their audiences through the global forces of commodification that convert narratives into the property of publishing and media houses (Baxi 40-1). Publishing houses in turn convert stories of suffering and survival into commodified experiences for general audiences with diverse desires and also for an increasing number of niche audiences interested in particular kinds of suffering. (23)

The commodification and fetishization of specific forms of suffering (i.e. "trauma narratives") put testimonios at particular risk of co-optation and of reducing its political vigor and vision to a "niche" form of political life writing. The publishing market's consolidation in the Global North furthers this likelihood, since it markets itself to consumers with the most capital, and thus publishes narratives with politics and perspectives that are most likely to appeal to these readers (Schaffer and Smith 24). As a result, global life narratives that overtly or subtly prescribe to a "west is best" ideology (such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran*) are more likely to realize success than texts that challenge western cultural and economic dominance.

In other words, publishing markets affect not only *whose* stories can be told, but also what *types* of stories are circulated (Schaffer and Smith 24). A past professor of mine used to say that if our gender studies discussions were as socially radical as we perceived them to be, they would not be institutionally supported. Critics of testimonio have made a parallel argument: if testimonio were as potentially socially transformative and radical as it purports to be, it would not be published. Rather, it is argued that testimonios, in an effort to gain legibility in the northern marketplace, compromise their radical potential in their adaptations of liberal, humanist, sometimes Christian, paradigms that pander to a first world audience and in turn neutralize their political bite. However, I argue that this all or nothing perspective, while necessary for healthy self-critique, can result in the premature dismissal of texts and authors that while walking the line, do so cautiously and with purpose.

It is true that the ways in which testimonios navigate a conservative/radical tightrope are fraught and not foolproof. It is inevitable they will at times steer off course; that the balance of power sometimes tips the wrong way, and that some works are more effective than others. In the end, however, I disagree with these naysayers. Far from pandering, I understand such narrative moves to put dominant paradigms to product use, to decolonize them from the inside out. Testimonios might appeal to what they know a first world publisher and audience might want, but more than “selling out,” working within liberal paradigms to articulate a more radical social agenda speaks to the resiliency and ability of marginalized social actors to adapt dominant paradigms for their own needs to and further their goals.

This trafficking in dangerous, co-optable language and narrative tropes can be understood along the lines of Chela Sandoval's claim that decoding is a necessary skill for decolonized consciousness, since this method positions one to both participate within and to "break" with the dominant ideological logic, ultimately allowing the subject to "identify, develop, and control the meaning of ideology" (Sandoval 43). In the context of testimonio, I argue that the employment of dominant tropes and story lines testifies to the ability of its authors not only to decode dominant scripts for their own purposes, but also to *re-encode* them through hybridized writing strategies that allow their radical political platforms to "pass" as liberal paradigm, and to in turn gain access to northern publishers and readerships. Rather than consolidating and reinforcing dominant power structures, such measures allow them to confound and rework them.<sup>18</sup>

In other words, while careful consideration of the publishing and political climates that frame how testimonios are written and received is central to understanding their overall ideological and material effects, these speculations must remain in sustained dialogue with the texts themselves. Ironically, the same critics who have spent years deciding where testimonio "fits" and whether it "works," have neglected close, sustained analysis of testimonio's rhetorical strategies. By continually focusing on extra-literary factors (audience, measurable social change, marketing) critics have often neglected close engagement with the writing itself.

Such criticism participates in its own critique by re-centering discussion on audiences in the Global North and giving short thrift to the multi-dimensional

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<sup>18</sup> Section Five considers these issues at length through the concept of "anancyism" in the work of Edwidge Danticat.

components of testimonios themselves. Even when engaged critics have focused on textual analysis, Nance argues that rigorous criticism is oft replaced by a one-dimensional celebration or dismissal of the text at hand, again reasserting first world privilege at the expense of meaningful cross-cultural engagement: “most scholars have agreed more or less politely not to criticize testimonio seriously as text, and/or to substitute either admirations for its producers or suspicion of their motives for any politically engaged textual analysis of the product” (12). My project pushes past these half-hearted attempts at sustained criticism by suggesting that the rhetorical strategies employed by a given testimonio need be addressed more concretely and fully. Doing so will move beyond premature dismissals and superficial “isn’t this great” criticism to exploring how testimonios achieve—or do not achieve—their intended effect.

It is also crucial in this power-laden debate to acknowledge that it is often the speaker who seeks out the audience, and not vice versa, which complicates arguments of their supposed naïvete or that they are being “taken advantage” of. As Beverley suggests, “someone like Rigoberta Menchú is also in a sense exploiting her interlocutor in order to have her story reach and influence an international audience, something that, as an activist for her community, she sees in quite utilitarian terms as a political task” (38). While Beverley’s evocation of an exploitative paradigm puts Menchú dangerously close to the “deceitful woman” argument, he nevertheless raises an important point on the bidirectionality of power that testimonio claims for itself and why testimonial speakers might seek out first world collaborators in the first place. Additionally, Nance’s appeal to the need for rhetorical analysis serves to remind critics of testimonio that formal

illiteracy does not equate to stunted intelligence. While speakers often work with a collaborator because they may not have access to the skill sets that would enable them to convey their platform in written form or speak in alternate language systems to reach their desired audiences, this does not prevent them from effectively communicating their insights and knowledge claims through alternate modes of address:

Much has been made of the fact that most testimonial speakers are not writers. Less has been said about the fact that their local communities generally regard them as skilled orators . . . People who have emerged as political organizers in their communities are generally talented speakers, and they have had frequent occasion to hone their persuasive skills . . .

Beginning in the oral context, long before speech becomes written testimonio, it has already been skillfully shaped. (Nance 20)

The speakers in testimonio are often skilled orators, leaders, and persuaders, utilizing a written medium to further the social reach of their particular skill set. Nance's insistence on taking seriously the role of rhetoric in testimonio is therefore vital to any successful body of criticism that engages with this writing project: "It is no wonder that people without power have spent a great deal of time learning about persuasion, and in the testimonial project they have put their involuntary apprenticeship to use" (Nance 62). By grooming its audience as trusted—or at the very least, potential—friends, practitioners of testimonio position its audience to consider themselves capable of intervening in the social problem at hand (Nance 65).

From this perspective, testimonio does not place its trust in the readers per se, but rather in the power of the word. As articulated by the narrator in *Cereus Blooms at Night*, “By setting this story down, I . . . am placing trust in the power of the printed word to reach many people” (Mootoo 1). In so doing, a careful balance of power is maintained between speaker and text. Testimonio is put forth into the world not naively, but as an additional possibility, a worthwhile risk. Considering the extent to which the Global South is already losing on the representational front, what is there to lose: the possibility of dominantly positioned readers not acting, not listening? If they are doing neither of these before reading a testimonio, the possibility of inaction or of a work falling on unreceptive ears does not seem like as risky a venture as critics have made it out to be. This reconsideration of the “stakes” involved is powerfully articulated by the Sangtin Writers in *Playing With Fire*: “Every deliberation on the question ‘Do we really want the stories of seven autobiographers to come out in this form?’ resulted in the same answer at the end: ‘We have already paid the price by telling it to one another. What can the readers take away now? Let them hear our stories’” (XL).

Nance’s call to engage with testimonio’s rhetorical practices replaces a paternalistic assumption of the straightforwardness and simplicity of testimonio’s authors by enacting a mode of engagement that gives due respect and consideration to their role in constructing a politically performative life narrative. Such a maneuver in the field of testimonio criticism is refreshing to say the least, but more so important and necessary to alter the idle question of whether it reinforces or destabilizes North/South power differentials, to the more productive question: *how* does it navigate the treacherous

terrain of North/South power asymmetries? In Nance's words, "[r]hetorical analysis of testimonio demands close attention to the speaker's goals with reference to a particular audience, as well as identification of specific strategies" (19). Sustained rhetorical analysis offers the possibility of shifting criticism from passive pontification to engaged scholarship that may prove useful to practitioners of testimonio who continue to sharpen its modes of address to extend the reach of their political and creative contributions.

*Is The Moment of Testimonio Over?*

In many ways, this question overlaps with concerns over the genre's efficacy. However, while questions of whether it "works" are focused on the text's effect on the reader, these questions turn attention back to the text, asking if the testimonio form has been "used up," if it has fulfilled its purpose and is now an abandoned project. These arguments often maintain a rigid understanding of testimonio in which texts must closely resemble Beverley's original (1989) definition of the writing form to pass as "true" testimonio. Not only does this neglect to consider the ways in which genres continually evolve, similar to literary criticism on autobiography, testimonio criticism has often (wrongly) assumed an internal coherence to this mode of life writing that ignores the continuum of forms it houses. The increasingly stylized and creatively sophisticated forms that draw upon basic principles of testimonio suggest it is counter-productive to require a literary litmus test to determine a testimonio's adherence to genre-bound rules.

Additionally, as several Latin American feminist critics have pointed out, testimonio's dismissal was also curiously timed. What remains curiously under addressed is how this increasing suspicion of testimonio coincides with women's

considerable—and increasing—presence and success within this life writing mode. As Lillian Manzor-Coats argues, by “deconstructing traditional female roles, women’s testimonials are beginning to emerge as a collective enterprise which cross over Eastern and Western narrative discourses” (168). John Beverley’s assertion that the “moment of testimonio is over” (280), thus has potentially disastrous effects for women writers and women’s activist groups who utilize testimonio as a preferred medium for articulating their political and creative visions. As Beverley himself has argued, “testimonio offers one kind of answer to the problem of women’s access to literature” (103), due to its democratic, people-powered ethos. To disqualify the literary and political merit of testimonio at a time when it continues to be a vibrant medium for transnational women writers seems to suggest another form of epistemic violence, one that continues to marginalize women’s collective voice as not central to literary canons or political revolutions.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than embalming testimonio as a thing of the past, I argue for a broader definition that positions it as a liberatory ethos and hybrid writing form that confounds readymade categories and testifies to the ability of literature to contribute to meaningful social change. The following section confronts arguments for testimonio’s premature dismissal by calling for a more fluid understanding of this writing mode, one that not only allows several formally distinct forms to fall under this category, but to also loosen it from its Latin American stronghold. The next section performs a critique of Beverley’s assertion that “the moment of testimonio is over” in an effort to make room for an

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<sup>19</sup> The relevance of women writers actively claiming this writing form is also important in how these efforts rework the masculinist encoding of the testimonio (“testes”) itself. They challenge gendered assumptions of who is a worthy testifier, and claim for themselves the role of knowledge producers.

alternate line of testimonio criticism that understands it as a flexible, hybrid writing form that employs a differential methodology (Sandoval) to realize its decolonizing potential through an ability to adapt itself to a range of circumstances and situations.

*Travels and Translations: Reconsidering the Theoretical Terrain of "The Real Thing"*

Georg M. Gugelberger's *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin*

*America* serves to provide a retrospective on the "rise and fall" of testimonio within the northern academy and is framed by the juxtaposition of Beverley's optimistic and much-cited opening essay "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio*" (1989) with his more somber, "The Real Thing" (1995). In an authoritative voice that becomes all the more so for offering the final words of the collection Beverley states, "the moment of testimonio is over . . . the originality and urgency . . . that drove our fascination and critical engagement with it, has undoubtedly passed, if only by the logic of aesthetic familiarization" ("The Real Thing" 280-281). Both earlier and later in this essay Beverley calls attention to how the "status of the testimonial narrator is a subject in her own right, rather than as someone who exists *for us* [the critics]" (268), and perhaps more importantly, that "the way in which subaltern groups themselves appropriate and *use* testimonio . . . has not been addressed adequately in the discussion on testimonio that has gone on among ourselves in the metropolitan academy" (280). Yet, in the above passage Beverley undermines the epistemological importance of these alternative claims by framing testimonio as a passing academic fad that within the logic of capitalism, could only briefly engage the "fascination" of Latin American literary critics before they

inevitably became intellectually bored with the genre through “the logic of aesthetic familiarization.”

As a literary academic, the point for Beverley is that “new forms of political imagination and organization are needed; that, as in everything else in life, we have to move on” (282). This claim is not entirely different from Chela Sandoval’s insistence that the “methodology of the oppressed” need rely on tactical, flexible maneuvers as a way of resisting political stasis and stagnation. But if the testimonial moment is “over” (understood as the predictable application of basic testimonial tenets to different Latin American locales), how does Beverley account for the ways in which testimonios continue to emerge in new geopolitical sites and in increasingly diverse structural forms? And why must these “new forms” necessarily be categorized outside of the category of testimonio? Indeed, there remains a disconcerting silence on Beverley’s part in how his scholarship came to cement the paradigmatic “rules” of the genre. While not discounting the important work his definition allowed for in identifying testimonio as a distinctive genre worthy of literary attention (for a mostly North American academic elite), Beverley’s (now) canonical categorization serves a much less radical function in our current social landscape and is unable to account for the ways in which the genre has transformed itself—or rather—has been transformed by those who seek to use its pedagogical force for their own political and creative needs.

Beverley’s intellectual dismissal of the genre reminds me of the theoretical tensions between “original” (read: real) and “copy” (read: less real) explored by Edward Said in “Traveling Theory” and “Traveling Theory Reconsidered”:

In an essay ('Traveling Theory') written several years ago, I discussed the ways in which theories sometimes 'travel' to other times and situations, in the process of which they lose some of their original power and rebelliousness . . . This bias can be put simply as follows: the first time a human experience is recorded and then given a theoretical formulation, its force comes from being directly connected to and organically provoked by real historical circumstances. Later versions of this theory cannot replicate its original power; because the situation has quieted down and changed, the theory is degraded and subdued, *made into a relatively tame academic substitute for the real thing*, whose purpose in the work I analyzed was political change. ("Traveling Theory Reconsidered" 436, my emphasis)

Said's gloss on his original line of argument strongly resonates with Beverley's insistence that it is time to "move on." Indeed, in "The Real Thing" we hear an almost identical sentiment when Beverley states that while *testimonio* was at one time "intimately linked to international solidarity networks in support of revolutionary movements or struggles around human rights, apartheid, democratization . . . [d]etached from these contexts, it loses its special aesthetic and ideological power" (281). In both Said's and Beverley's musings, there is legitimate concern over how far radical ideas can "stretch" before losing their integrity and oppositional consciousness. Clearly, attentiveness to the social situatedness of a text is of central importance. But as Said concedes in a radical re-envisioning of his original essay, this perspective also forecloses the possibilities of

theories “sparking” and igniting passion in readerships removed from the immediate context of conception, but who perhaps reside in situations with parallel sociopolitical circumstances, thereby allowing the theory to grow fertile roots on seemingly foreign soil.

In revisiting the “inevitable” domestication of a theory as it travels further from its originary site, Said instead fathoms the possibility of “an alternative mode of traveling theory, one that actually develop[s] away from its original formulation . . . [and] flames out, so to speak, restates and reaffirms its own inherent tensions by moving to another site” (438). By the end of “Traveling Theory Reconsidered” Said completely retracts his earlier argument, telling his readership instead that the “point of theory . . . is to travel, always to move beyond its confinements, to emigrate, to remain in a sense in exile . . . . This movement suggests the possibility of actively different locales, sites, situations for theory” (451-452).

Said’s revised understanding of traveling theory is useful for contesting Beverley’s argument on several levels. In a literal sense, testimonio continues to take root in new geopolitical spaces. These migrations are engendering new possibilities for the formulaic construction of this mode of life writing as it becomes utilized by differently located groups and their sanctioned social issues. As academics our analytical frameworks and tools for understanding testimonio must also “travel” in order to do justice to this developing body of work.

To return to Said’s articulated tension between “original” and “copy” I argue that we need to question the productivity of a teleological, lineage model of origins in the first

place if, in fact, the point of theory *is* to travel, and is always already traveling. It is not insignificant that the contemporary genre of testimonio, as we currently understand it, came to be in a dynamic Latin American social landscape marked by cultural revolutions, dictatorships and *los desaparecidos*, struggles for land rights, and legal recognition. Yet, it need not be *contained* by this context; to do so would be to neglect to recognize the broader political possibilities it engenders. Indeed, testimonio is often understood as “belonging” to Latin America for no other reason than the formal development of a prize category testimonio by Casa de las Americas in 1970 (Nance 2).

By limiting our understanding of testimonio to a specific geopolitical site, or in terms of a list of imposed genre conventions, we risk ignoring the underlying *ethos* and political and cultural immaterialities that define this flexible, grounded writing form. Rather than marking Latin America rightful “owners” of this form of life writing, I argue the creation of the Casa de las Americas prize category and the subsequent development of Latin American testimonio criticism speaks to the hybrid writing projects’s sustained success, proliferation, and timeliness within the varied Latin American climate in which a particular strand of this larger first person plural life writing project emerged. That is, while it may serve as a paradigmatic example given the force with which it broke through the Latin American cultural imagination to gain legibility as a distinctive writing form, we need not consider it the only geopolitical site to utilize a first person plural life writing project filtered through the life lens of a subaltern subject to deliver grounded social critique.

In fact, various forms of testimonial literature have remained on the margins of life writing in English since the sixteenth century (Beverley 280), serving both conservative agendas in the forms of travel writing and nation building texts, and progressive abolitionist platforms.<sup>20</sup> Recent books such as Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* further complicate understandings of testimonio as mere cultural imports—troubling any easy understanding of “original” and “copy”—by illustrating how *dalit* (lower caste affiliated) Indian women have been “doing” testimonio without calling it as such, or in fact ever hearing the term. With narrative accounts ranging from 1981-2003, these texts mark a simultaneous congruence with contemporary Latin American testimonios, rather than an “application” of Latin American testimonio to the postcolonial Indian context.

While Rege's book attaches the Spanish signifier “testimonio” to the selected *dalit* narratives with no formal qualification, Kavita Panjabi's “Probing ‘Morality’ and State Violence: Feminist Values and Communicative Interaction in Prison *Testimonios* in India and Argentina” explicitly argues for why testimonio should be understood as a writing methodology by-for the oppressed that extends beyond Latin American national and ideological borders: “Focusing on the ‘microsocial’ worlds of women's . . . experiences, they enact critiques of the ‘macrosocial’ patriarchal oppressive states, elaborating upon the ways in which women's bodies become one of many sites of state control” (155). Panjabi's formulation of a comparativist reading between Indian and Argentinean texts more specifically locates feminist testimonio as a form of textual praxis

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<sup>20</sup>Abolitionist testimonial literature spanning US, English, and Caribbean contexts includes *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, and *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*.

capable of illuminating transnational flows of power and its gendered effects in women's daily lives.

My call for a broader conceptual understanding of testimonio as a textual practice emanating from a range of geopolitical sites rather than discursively locating this pattern under the more generic rubric of "testimonial literature" is influenced by recent texts such as Rege's and Panjabi's that self-consciously employ the Spanish signifier to discursively, politically, and conceptually align their elsewhere-located-projects with the liberatory Latin American social movements that have employed testimonio as part of social justice platforms, a maneuver that taps into the already established cultural currency the Spanish term yields. As a shorthand encoding that connotes a particular deployment of testimony for the purpose of strengthening a social justice platform rather than employed for individualist purposes, there is a resonant political bite in the utterance of "testimonio" that immediately conveys its power as a quintessential example of a resistant writing project.

Rather than creating a new academic term for geopolitically diverse engagements with hybrid, socially conscious, first-person plural forms of life writing, I argue that we follow the direction of what Rege's and Panjabi's deployment of the term "testimonio" suggests: that utilizing this signifier to refer to geopolitically and structurally diverse first-person, social justice-focused literature builds upon a well-established, widely recognized, and respected socioliterary platform that simultaneously performs a powerful symbolic gesture of countertopographic, postcolonial solidarity that works to trace a South/South political trajectory. Such a discursive alignment attests to a hybrid textual

politics that works from within to re-energize already established writing forms rather than directing efforts to uncover non-existent “pure” alternatives.

In fact, the widely accepted use of the German-originated literary term *bildungsroman* (novel of development) to refer to first-person narratives from a range of geopolitical sites should make us wary of arguments that suggest testimonio is not equally suited to travel thusly, replicating arguments that western originates be understood as “universal” while all others remain “culturally specific.” The Anglicized “testimonial literature” reads as a “testimonio-lite,” a sanitized version that neutralizes this writing form’s political and locational roots in the Global South. Simultaneously, it is the decidedly non-neutral encoding of “testimonio” that confronts the inescapable contradictions of postcolonial modes of representation. At once a marker of Spanish colonization and coded within a language positioned as lesser in an English-dominated global culture, the linking of disparately rooted texts under the Spanish signifier becomes a bridging mechanism or tactical maneuver (Sandoval) that replicates the very hybrid, strategic, and creative ethos that the project of testimonio has been credited with.

In this way, I argue that “testimonio” work as a fabricated lens to yoke together differently manifested first person plural narratives with a social justice impetus to better see what cannot be seen when these narratives are kept in isolation on the basis of genre and country of origin. This concept is not so different from Brent Hayes Edwards’ consideration of the discursive function of “black diaspora” in *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Here Edwards considers the construct “black diaspora” not as a naïve glossing of difference, but rather in terms of

*décalage*, a linguistic “prop” that allows for cross-cultural exchange while making discursively visible the asymmetries and incompatibilities that accompany such dialogue; a “differences within unity” model (Edwards 14).

A central concern in using this term as an umbrella concept should be whether the application of “testimonio” to testimonial texts outside of the Latin American context will overwrite culturally and place-specific writing traditions. However, I argue that it is precisely the very localized resonance of “testimonio” that furthers its ability to be understood as a postcolonial paradigm, a discursive gesture that destabilizes a dependence on physical and national borders by applying emphasis on epistemological and historical *interconnections*. My employment of “testimonio” moves away from “country of origin” model commonly espoused by literature departments, to a “point of origin” model that draws upon Chandra Mohanty’s comparativist framework to highlight epistemological interconnections between sites with overlapping histories, even as these histories have different manifestations in contemporary social landscapes. Uniting structurally variant texts from diverse locales under the umbrella concept of testimonio therefore does not seek to cancel out the writing traditions of their home sites, but rather to draw upon the political resonance and recognition that the term “testimonio” elicits, and to build upon the field of testimonio studies rather than begin anew.

Insofar as Sandoval argues that this “differential” approach enacted by the methodology of the oppressed requires flexibility and movement between ideological and location-based sites that needs to be understood as both “symptom” and “remedy” of transnational capitalism (178), we can understand a broadened definition of testimonio to

enact a necessary risk by charting alternative cartographies and communities of co-travelers that rely upon epistemological and political points of overlap rather than in terms of rigid containment by genre and geography. This move to understand testimonio as a cross-border, hybrid, textual politics does not eradicate the necessary work testimonio enacts within its own geopolitical site of origin, rather it positions us to understand the potentialities of its simultaneous local and global resonance. As such, it reconfigures testimonio as an exercise in *proximity*, bringing disparate speakers and readers into a textual cont(r)act. By creating a textual bridge to link together readers with social actors from different geopolitical sites, epistemologies, situations, and perspectives, testimonio brings disparate worlds into critical proximity, a posturing that privileges intimacy even while distance is maintained. It is a practice in translation, a translation of the speaker's world to an audience who occupies quite another.

Testimonio's potential ability to simultaneously yield a global/local resonance is itself derived from its deeply rooted place-based ethos. If we recall Menchú's insistence that she emerged as part of a community, and not in isolation, then any employment of testimonio must necessarily elicit a localized resonance. As particularly illustrated by the activist feminist testimonios with which my project engages, testimonial literature emanating from outside Latin America employs culturally specific language, metaphors, and folklore to firmly anchor itself to the cultural spaces from which the narratives emerge; discursive practices that safeguard against being taken up interchangeably or viewed as mere copies of an original.<sup>21</sup> As such, geopolitically diverse practitioners of

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<sup>21</sup> For instance, linguistically, *Telling to Live* straddles English and Spanish. *Lionheart Gal* translates Jamaican Creole into a written mode. *Playing With Fire* and *Walking on Fire* serve as translations from

testimonio do not merely “apply” a uniform notion of testimonio. They alter and translate the form to resonate with their immediate situations and needs.

Linking geopolitically diverse first-person plural life narratives with a social justice lens under the signifier of “testimonio” also holds potential for forwarding the existing stagnation of academic discussions on testimonio. Latin American studies has already carved out a well-established intellectual terrain for asking preliminary questions and instigating initial discussions, but by broadening our understanding of what qualifies as testimonio and locating diversified forms within, rather than without, this categorical descriptor, we initiate more interesting and productive discussions about the potentialities of this hybrid life writing form.

Expanding upon existing definitions of testimonio to incorporate a range of structurally varied first-person plural social justice writing projects allows us to overhaul the four dominant questions asked of this writing form—What is it? Does it work? Does it reinforce or destabilize Global North/South divides? Is the testimonio moment over?—to the more nuanced question set: What modes of inquiry are needed to adequately dialogue with this writing project’s hybrid politics and aesthetics? Why does testimonio continue to be a chosen vehicle for literary writers and activist groups in the Global South to articulate social problems and creative visions? How does it navigate the treacherous

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Hindi and Haitian Creole, with key phrases expressed in the original languages. Metaphorically, *Playing With Fire* uses the metaphor of “monsoon clouds” to address the weight of the tears the women experienced when sharing their stories (9). In *Walking on Fire*, Bell utilizes a locally resonant simile to describe the conditions of poor Haitian women: “Popular snacks in Haiti are *peze souse*, squeeze and suck, frozen pops . . . The *istwas* (storytellers) in this chapter are told by women being consumed like a *peze souse*” (24). In addition, *Lionheart Gal* and *Walking on Fire* heavily rely on Jamaican and Haitian folkloric traditions to illustrate their points.

terrain of North/South power asymmetries? How does testimonio continue to transform in form and function?

To recap, my call for understanding a more expansive understanding of testimonio as an enjoining, liberatory ethos seeks to expand upon—rather than replace or overturn—the foundational work of Latin American testimonio scholars. I do not dispute individual definitions or descriptions, for these no doubt correspond with specific deployments of testimonio. However, I argue that utilizing the available signifier of “testimonio” as a lens to unite structurally diverse first-person plural social justice narratives allows us to read across texts that would normally be seen as isolated genres (in the case of the texts of my study, postcolonial *bildungsroman*, historical fiction, (auto)ethnography, life history) to better engage their enjoining *ethos*.

It bears reiterating Smith and Watson’s argument that individual forms of life writing can multiply embody simultaneous categories of life writing, so that referring to an individual work as “testimonio” does not prevent it from also being read through the lens of (auto)ethnography, postcolonial *bildungsroman*, or as a regionally specific writing practice. Likewise, opening up the concept of testimonio and applying this term to texts that do not self-consciously refer to themselves as such does not reduce their richness by making them “fit” into a rigidly defined literary category. As a critical posture, the analytical framework of testimonio as an umbrella term allows differently positioned authors and critics to read across traditionally recognized genres and geographies to realize alternative cartographies and communities of contemporary co-travelers who utilize first-person plural life narratives to further social justice initiatives.

To return to the original line of contestation—Beverley’s assertion that “the moment of testimonio is over”—I argue that insofar as his argument depends upon a static, unchanging notion of the formal qualities that define testimonio, rather than a notion of a hybrid, flexible ethos that recognizes resistant writing as integral to social justice projects, we are unable to truly engage with its revolutionary potential. But how, to quote Said, to make testimonio “flame out”? Where and how can it “travel” without losing the ember of its existence? To formulate responses to these questions, the remainder of my project turns attention to the representational practices utilized by a particular strand of contemporary co-travelers: polyvocal feminist testimonios.

## **Chapter Two: Taking Aim at the Cultural Imaginary: Feminist Testimonios at Work**

“Bombarded by another’s language and culture, we play out our resistance to the siege, fighting in vain against the artillery of reality with phrases as our only weapons.” ~Nora Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death*

“While our hunger for intellectual and social justice still propels the utopian dreams that have nourished us, only the homemade theories we create out of our shared lives really help us to make sense of everything that we are and all that we find to love.” –The Latina Feminist Group, *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*

Contemporary feminist testimonios are not without precedent. As Linda S. Maier and Isabel Dulfano address in *Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women*, testimonio has been saturated with women’s voices since its inception as a contemporary genre (Maier 2). Two paradigmatic testimonios—*I, Rigoberta Menchú* and *Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*—both feature women’s testimonies, and are in turn edited and translated by women, not to disregard the innovative contribution of feminist oral historian Margaret Randall. Nevertheless, the gendered dimensions of these critiques—the truth claims they

put forth about the lived experiences of women's subjectivity—have rarely been the focus of extended scholarly inquiry (Maier 2). It is with irony then, that as more women literary writers and activist women's groups have come to utilize the genre for their explicitly feminist creative and political work outside of an immediate Latin American context, their efforts have coincided with its declared metaphoric death.

If the testimonial moment is “over” as dominant modes of testimonio criticism would have us believe,<sup>22</sup> what would lead U.S. based Latina feminist scholars to employ testimonio as a methodological framework for grappling with the sociohistorical and material differences that are oft swept under the rug in an effort to cultivate camaraderie between Latina feminist academics? Why would impoverished Haitian women actively seek out a U.S. based oral historian to recite stories and poems of their particular struggles and modes of resistance?<sup>23</sup> What would motivate a group of working class Jamaican women to continue utilizing testimony and people's theater to address poor women's issues 35 years after the original group was formed and 25 years after constructing a written account of its founding members' stories?<sup>24</sup> And why would a group of village-level Indian NGO activists encourage their fellow *sangtin*<sup>25</sup> positioned

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<sup>22</sup> See Gugelburger, Georg M. (ed.). *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

<sup>23</sup> In the Preface to Beverly Bell's *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance* states: “[e]ven if I had been able to work on the project full-time, it would have been impossible to meet the demand of all the women who wanted to give their stories. As word of the book spread women I had never heard of began showing up in my office and home. Once, I was invited to an afternoon meeting of rape survivors where the organizer asked the packed room for one or two volunteers. Hours later, I ran out of cassettes as the last four women patiently awaited their turn to speak” (xiiv-xiv).

<sup>24</sup> Sistren Theatre Collective was established in 1977.

<sup>25</sup> As defined in *Playing With Fire*, “In Awadhi, *sangtin* is a term of solidarity, of reciprocity, of enduring friendship among women; it is used by a woman to refer to her close female companion who sees her through the trials and tribulations of life” (xxlll).

within the North American academy to undergo a (linguistic, conceptual) translation of their collective writings and reflections in book form?

As a bridge concept, feminist testimonio builds upon and redirects the work of foundational testimonio. At a basic level, feminist testimonio is the linkage, or convergence, of two liberatory social projects. If testimonio has been mainly concerned with questions of political economy and the lived effects of globalization in the daily existence of marginalized social actors generally, then the feminist lens brings into focus multiple simultaneous dimensions of embodied subjectivity in an effort to further contextualize how effects of globalization are differently experienced by distinctly gendered bodies even within comparable social class, labor-based, or regional locations.

Within feminist testimonio the meanings of women's political awakenings are always context specific and intimately connected to a politics of location, causing texts to differently inhabit the label "feminist." As argued by Olga Benoit in Beverly Bell's *Walking On Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance*, "feminist means becoming a woman politically" (186).<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the descriptor "feminist" denotes a text's self-conscious awareness of the interconnectedness of social inequalities that grants particular attention to the specific ways that gendered cultural oppressions and material poverty attach themselves to women's bodies in different geopolitical locales. While "women" remain a constant subject of focus in these various texts, none consider this gendered positioning in isolation from national, ethnic, racial, class, and sexual affiliations, among others. As such, feminist testimonios carry the potential to realize a

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<sup>26</sup> Bell, Beverly. *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

truly intersectional methodological approach through their understanding of how intersecting axes of social power multiply inform people's lived realities and by documenting the effects of individual strands of institutional power structures through the threaded complexities of women's daily lives. It is therefore through the production of testimonios that text and project-specific meanings of "feminist" and "women" emerge.

The political work undertaken by feminist testimonios importantly refuses the mass erasure of women's subjective experiences across disparate geopolitical sites, cultural contexts, and material conditions. For scholars to disqualify the literary and political merit of testimonio at a time when it continues to be a vibrant medium for transnational women writers under the auspice it no longer "works" therefore serves to participate in the well-worn masculinist argument that women's contributions are not central to literary canons or political revolutions. In addition to an effective silencing of the work of women writers and activists employing this writing form in their situated contexts due to its diminished political cache, there is also a more biting, diffuse masculinist undertone at play: the assumption that cultural resistance—such as creative writing and theater—does not serve an important function in and of itself. Rather, so this thinking goes, cultural resistance is only useful if it directly, tangibly translates into resistant political action in the "legitimized" forms of strikes, boycotts, and armed revolutions.

As a culturally resistant writing project, all testimonio recognizes creative writing as an integral component to social justice platforms. However, while traditional testimonio has employed writing as a means to a political end, trivializing its attitudinal

effects in its concern with direct political action, I argue that feminist testimonios take specific aim at the cultural imaginary by intervening in dominant modes of representational practices. That is, if foundational testimonios have privileged “action” in physically combative forms, feminist testimonios place equal weight in altering a reader’s worldview; an “action” defined by a critical shift in consciousness.

Feminist testimonios are thus best understood as political weapons that take aim at the cultural imaginary to challenge the center-periphery worldview of dominantly positioned social actors. Practitioners of feminist testimonio are more than writers; they are word warriors who employ the written to enact a tactical-textual recruiting method that draws upon a focused rhetorical deployment of pathos to affectively connect with readers who occupy different cultural and material worlds in sustained effort to bring these worlds into critical proximity. As such, the descriptor “feminist” more broadly signals an egalitarian and politically motivated mode of inquiry, made palpable in the various tactics that feminist testimonios employ to undermine the masculinist framing and assumptions of foundational testimonio.

My project articulates these patterns through two major sub-categories of feminist testimonio, literary and activist testimonios. Although there are certainly feminist testimonios that span both categories, it is my contention that these divisions (lines in the sand as they are) speak to larger trends in the format, function, and goals of feminist testimonio. While many literary writers now employ a testimonial framework in their (often historically grounded) “fictions” (Edwidge Danticat, Nawal el Saadawi, Shani

Mootoo),<sup>27</sup> so too do activists and political women's groups outside of the literary sphere (Rigoberta Menchú, Sistren Theatre Collective, Sangtin Writers)<sup>28</sup> employ testimonial writing to more directly stage political interventions. Indeed, even within these examples the lines between the literary and nonliterary are blurred. While all narratives are simultaneously real and imagined to different degrees, both the "literary" and "activist" forms of feminist testimonio remain committed to the creative *and* political. This blurring of the (non)imagined, as illustrated through testimonio writings at large, is essential for disrupting elitist western notions of "art for art's sake" and in explicitly linking the imagined to the political. Feminist testimonios rewrite and redirect basic tenets of testimonio even as they build upon them, importantly re-envisioning and re-energizing the testimonial genre by utilizing it as a methodological tool to realize the creative and political visions of women writers and activist women's groups in their socially situated contexts.

### *Polyvocality in Feminist Testimonio*

While traditional testimonios have employed an "I" that is "we,"<sup>29</sup> contemporary feminist testimonios often incorporate many voices and subject positions. This polyvocal

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<sup>27</sup> Danticat, Edwidge. *Krik? Krak!* NY: Vintage Books, 1996; Saadawi, Nawal el. *Woman at Point Zero*. Trans. Sherif Hetata. New York: Zed Books Ltd, 1983; Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*. New York: Perennial, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Menchú, Rigoberta. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman from Guatemala*. London: Verso, 1983; Sistren with Honor Ford Smith. *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women*. Ed. Honor Ford Smith. London: The Women's Press, 1986; *Playing With Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> For more discussions on the function of metonymy in *testimonio*, see Sommer, Doris. "Not Just a Personal Story: Women's *Testimonios* and the Plural Self." *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Ed. Bella Bordzki and Celeste Schenck. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988; Beverley, John. "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio*." *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Ed. Georg Gugelburger. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996; Zimmerman, Marc. "Testimonio in Guatemala: Payeras, Rigoberta, and Beyond." Gugelburger, Georg M. (ed.). *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1996.

structure mitigates the genre's reliance on metonymy by allowing speakers to be explicitly named and identified within the body of the text.<sup>30</sup> But *how* they employ polyvocality and to what *effect* largely depends upon whether a given feminist testimonio is literary or activist in intent. For instance, polyvocality in literary testimonios (which may alternately be referred to as the testimonial novel, historical fiction, or postcolonial *bildungsroman*) is often achieved either through the form of a short story cycle or through shifting the narrative perspective of individual chapters by alternating between characters. Activist feminist testimonios (which may alternately be referred to as (auto)ethnography, oral history, or life history) achieve a polyphonic effect by either dedicating an entire chapter to individual speakers' life stories, or by braiding together several speaker's stories around individually themed chapters. This collective resonance openly positions culture as a contested terrain while highlighting how the similarities and divergences between individual accounts enable a three-dimensional understanding of sociohistorical conditions in a situated context. Through the heterogeneity of experience and perception, fragmented truth claims subtly emerge, claims that then need to be pieced together and worked through in order for epistemic wholeness to more thoroughly materialize.

The effect of both utilizations of polyvocality is to provide a dynamic multi-voiced framework that necessarily interrupts homogenous, monolithic representational

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<sup>30</sup> In each of the collections referenced here, the women were given a choice to employ a pseudonym, maintain anonymity, or be referenced by their real names. In *Lionheart Gal*, the women remain anonymous. In *Playing With Fire*, pseudonyms are used within the narrative frame, but the work is published under the author's real names. In *Walking on Fire*, all women chose to use their real names except for two who also employ pseudonyms in their daily life. *Telling to Live* acknowledges the names of the women who participated in the project, but a few of the individual narratives are authored anonymously.

practices and heads off the interpretation of socially marginalized speakers as noncomplex, “authentic” subjects. Still, feminist literary and activist *uses* of polyvocality differ. While literary strands tend to employ polyvocality as a way to raise theoretical and epistemological questions on the subjective nature of memory and historical accounts, it is the contestation and diversification of dominant cultural narratives that by in large remain the focus; the stories themselves enact the meaning. In contrast, while feminist activist testimonios are also in the business of “multiplying the narrative,” they take care to articulate the collaborative methodologies that underpin their projects, which are attentive to the possibilities and foreclosures of differently positioned women coming together to work around collectively defined sets of social issues. As such, while both feminist literary and activist testimonios reframe the genre through polyvocal structures, their motivations and methods for doing so differ.

*Feminist Testimonio as Memory Work: Linking the Discursive to the Material*

One of the main ways that feminist testimonios critique the masculinist bent of testimonio is to either implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the labors of writing and reading, remembering and dreaming, as political *work*. As Trinh T. Minh-ha argues, this focus on the labors of telling and writing is of central importance to challenging dominant definitions of what counts as cultural resistance, since too often “the concept of ‘writing’...seems to be incompatible with the concept of ‘work’” (249). Referencing the example of Toni Cade Bambara, Minh-ha details how Bambara “c[a]me to appreciate that it is a perfectly legitimate way to participate in struggle” (249, qtd. Bambara).

Contemporary writers such as Edwidge Danticat have suggested the same.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the employment of life writing has long been a central forum to articulate struggles for gendered subjectivity as women writers have employed various autobiographical practices to literally write themselves into cultural being.<sup>32</sup> As Stacey Schlauf suggests in “The Use of the Word,” feminist uses of testimonio extend the ways in which women writers have continually challenged the basic premises of autobiography paradigms in order to “convert their marginality into a creative site of cultural production” (Schlauf xix).

Beyond their immediate contributions to the multi-faceted body of women’s literature, the motivation to recognize writing as cultural work solidifies how the discursive and the material are inextricably linked. It also speaks to how flexible, multi-dimensional modes of resistance must be recognized in the (too often) masculine realm of “struggle” and “revolution” that continue to privilege the material. Feminist renderings of this hybrid textual politics not only measure the value of such narratives in external, large-scale policy-related effects, but also in relation to smaller, interpretive shifts, including internal psychic effects that often serve as catalysts for (women’s) self-actualization. Rather than trivialize the role that imaginative writing contributes to liberatory politics, feminist testimonios actively embrace the unique opportunity of

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<sup>31</sup> See Capshaw Smith, Katherine. “Splintered Families, Enduring Connections: An Interview with Edwidge Danticat.” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 30:2 (2005): 194-206.

<sup>32</sup> For an overview of primary texts and criticism engaging with feminist uses of autobiography see Stanton, Domna C (ed.). *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography From the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984; Brownley, Martine Watson and Allison B. Kimmich (eds.). *Women and Autobiography*. Wilmington, Delaware: SR Books, 1999; Webber, Jeannette L. and Joan Grumman (eds.). *Woman as Writer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978; Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson (eds.). *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

literature to affectively connect with an audience in an effort to shift their worldview. By entering the terrain of cultural knowledge production, feminist testimonios creatively re-explore and rewrite the ways in which women have been represented through mediated accounts on the international circuit. In so doing, feminist testimonios claim representational politics as the terrain in which testimonio—as a cultural resistant mode of writing—is best suited to intervene.

As Hirsch and Smith suggest, testimonios serve as “counternarratives” that provide an alternative historical archive. Testimonios depend upon re-engaging and working with memory in order to differently frame how cultural events have been dominantly narrated. The temporal dimension of the genre is therefore crucial and addresses one way in which feminist testimonios utilize the tropes of “work” and “labor” through an articulation of processes of “memory work” and “dream work.” In Jean Franco’s “Obstinate Memory” she argues that “memory work” is a “productive activation of memory enabling it as a political weapon” in which it is “not just memory but social and collective memory that is seen as resistant to the dominant narrative” (237). Seen in this way, feminist testimonios are sites of “active remembering” that write against the silencing of unofficial, marginalized accounts of (gendered) history (Hirsch and Smith 13).

But “memory work” is no easy task. As the phrase suggests, it is laborious, it is work that is marked by strong internal and external resistance. In *A Single Numberless Death* Strejilevich documents the very real challenge of memory work as she grapples with complex emotions during her struggle to be officially recognized as a political

prisoner by the Argentinean government. This burden of proof—coupled with the severely uneven power relations between herself and the national government—triggers for her the memory of the military breaking into her home, heightening the seeming futility of naming her experience (and the experiences of thousands of other prisoners) to state officials:

That must be the reason nothing ever happens to them. The Joint Commander entered our house through the main door, and no one thought anything of it. These men are speaking with the voice of experience. We, however, seem like petty thieves, amateurs unfamiliar with the basic rules of impunity: act in broad daylight, without worrying about covering your tracks. (Strejilevich 37)

Although it is the military (public sphere) that invades the narrator's home, and the homes of many other political prisoners (private sphere), the Commander's position renders him the authority to walk through the "main door" without fearing repercussions. The ability to access and terrorize the private lives of Argentinean citizens comes from his unquestioned "experience," experience that places him on the "right" side of hegemonic history, while the victims and the survivors must continue to prove their right to existence in the forms of counternarratives and legal proceedings, all the while being unable to move past this physical and psychological disruption in their personal lives. As Strejilevich's accounts suggests, memory work is not luxury or choice. It becomes a mode of survival; a way to act in the present moment without being paralyzed by the oppressive structural forces that must be faced.

But if memory work is a tool of survival, the crafting of testimonial writings becomes a creative, politically engaged act that directly challenges unidirectional life accounts in the realms of history, ethnography, and literature. Refusing to be systemically silenced, writers of feminist testimonio document their life stories and the life stories of women with whom they are politically aligned with out of recognition that the cultural imaginary is an important site of political intervention. Memory work is not elicited simply for memory's sake. It is utilized to recognize traces of the past in the present; it is called upon to imagine more egalitarian futures. Indeed, the simultaneity of looking back to look forward is present in all of testimonio. As John Beverley argues, “[i]f testimonio is an art of memory, it is an art directed not only toward the memorialization of the past but also to the constitution of more heterogeneous, diverse, egalitarian, and democratic nation-states, as well as forms of community, solidarity, and affinity that extend beyond or between nation-states” (Beverley 24). Feminist testimonios necessarily extend this towards an explicitly gender-equity focused intent.

Feminist testimonios simultaneously enact “dream work” through an articulation of their expressed desires for just futures. In so doing, they dispute a reactive use of counternarrative by proactively articulating visions of what must change for such futures to materialize. While both literary and activist feminist testimonios rely on memory and dream work to articulate their counternarratives, the temporal dimensions (past, present, future) of a speaker's testimony are differently weighted within the body of the text. It can be provisionally argued that activist forms tend to document the existing microsocial effects of larger macrosocial flows of power in its gendered dimensions, while literary

employments lean towards imagining how things could be and/or representing the types of relationships that disrupt gender violence in its multiple forms. But as soon as I make this distinction, so must I qualify and undo its binary nature. Indeed, activist feminist testimonios might engage in memory work to labor over the felt realities of daily life, but this documentation exists to help its testifiers and readers dream of how life could and/or should be.

Collections such as Beverly Bell's *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women's Stories of Survival and Resistance* implicitly highlight the social function of hope wherein the speakers articulate their political motivations through a felt desire to not have their children give up on their dreams as they have been forced to do. Other collections, such as Sangtin's *Playing With Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism Through Seven Lives in India*, self-consciously saturate the text with a palpable tension between memory and dream work. As the Sangtin Writers make clear, the labor of memory work allows its participants to dream of an otherwise, in this case a targeted "otherwise" in the form of a people's movement that does not reinstate social hierarchies in its organizational framework. Likewise, while many literary manifestations of feminist testimonio hold an open hand towards the future for its protagonists and readers, this opening is always drawn in stark contrast to the life outcomes of other characters or the acute pain of a protagonist's past experiences. In Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* this presents itself in the delicate, unlikely friendship that develops between an elderly woman patient whose history of sexual violence remains both manifest and absent in her subsequent muteness, and a genderqueer nurse who is only truly "seen" by his seemingly-broken

patient. In the framework of Mootoo's novel, this unique friendship develops outwardly from their felt "shared queerness" (48), suggesting that the relationship these characters develop cannot be separated from the social violences both have experienced.<sup>33</sup>

All of this is to say, that in *all* manifestations of feminist testimonio "memory work" cannot be thought in isolation from "dream work." Just as history and futurity are dialectically connected—one must revisit the past to understand the present and re-envision the future—so do activist and literary feminist testimonios function as two sides of the same coin. What differs are the particular goals and writing strategies espoused by a given text. While activist and literary manifestations might err on one side (documenting existing gendered conditions) more than the other (imagining social alternatives), the functions of memory work and dream work are *complementary* and necessarily thought alongside of each other in feminist testimonio. The processes of memory and dream work enacted by feminist testimonio are discussed at length in Section Two.

*Beyond 'Recognition': The Forging of a Bidirectional Social Pact*

Feminist testimonios' reframing of "work" and "labor" is also integral to how they destabilize the widely held unidirectional interpretation of the witness-testifier paradigm. As suggested, criticism on testimonio has served to overemphasize the power differentials between (first world) reader and (third world) text, often foreclosing the possibility of a text's ability to successfully navigate this tenuous terrain. This is in part due to how critics have relied on a narrow understanding of the witness-testifier paradigm. While it is the case that the narrative speaker is understood as "witness" of the

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<sup>33</sup> Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*. New York: Perennial, 2001.

instance of social injustice being relayed, it is most commonly interpreted with the “testifier” as the speaker/narrator of a given testimonio who addresses a “witness” in the form of the reading audience. This popular apolitical and one-dimensional interpretation of the witness-testifier paradigm no doubt corresponds with the pervasiveness of the psychoanalytic framework utilized in studies on testimony and trauma (Nance 100).<sup>34</sup>

While the testifying process can aid in confronting trauma by acting as a catalyst in the healing process (even as it often re-triggers psychic and somatic stress, as evidenced by the Strejilevich passage), I am wary of attempts to frame the usefulness of testimonio in terms of its cathartic effects wherein an outside party “bears witness” to the story and rewards the testifier with “recognition.” As Kelly Oliver suggests, “[r]ecognition is the soft currency with which oppressed people are exchanged within the global economy. In this way, recognition, like capital, is essential to the economy of domination” (Oliver 23). Recognition, as seen from this perspective, can be understood as the process by which marginalized people garner attention from dominant culture(s) for the sake of inclusion and affirmation of existence.

Within this logic, the “work” of testimonio is equated to having the speakers from the Global South gain “recognition” and visibility from readers in the North. While this paradigm of recognition appeals to, and is oft utilized by, the assimilationist model of mainstream multiculturalist efforts, it does not properly represent the goals of the

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<sup>34</sup> Within the psychoanalytic model, the act of testifying is understood to provide therapeutic resolve and psychic closure to the testifier through the act of conveying the events to an outside party. Various truth commissions, including those enacted in South Africa and Latin America, have also utilized this framework in an effort to address human rights violations and catalyze national processes of healing. For an extended discussion of this topic see Schaffer, Kay and Sidonie Smith. *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2004.

feminist testimonio project. Rather, feminist testimonio poetically articulates righteous outrage at an unjust situation in textual form, seeks retribution, and reaches out to those who have the power to stop a situation of injustice, in order to build a voluntary, cross-border alliance one reader at a time. Thus, the witness-testifier model is not utilized in testimonio to make the speaker visible for visibility's sake, but to bring the speaker's situation into view so that it can be changed for the better, as instigated by destabilizing the reader's accepted worldview.

If the project of traditional testimonio has been understood as naively placing its transformative potential in the hands of the reader—leading some to call it a “pedagogy of the unoppressed” (Nance 49)—through an awareness of the pervasive power of the cultural imaginary, feminist testimonios fiercely insist on a bidirectionality of power that refuses to yield all interpretive power to the reader. Indeed, in feminist testimonio the labors of writing, memory, and dream work are reframed to hold meaning for the participants/writers/tellers themselves as they witness themselves and each other, resulting in a blurring, or queering, of the normative witness/testifier paradigm.

While literary strands often accomplish this through the utilization of a testimonial framework that discursively reframes a given short story collection or novel from unidirectional entertainment to bidirectional social pact, activist testimonios do so by claiming political worth in the labors that collectively comprise a given text, not merely the audience's reading of the project's final published form. In this way, activist feminist testimonios highlight how the “work” begins long before individual testimonios reach a reading audience and will continue after the product has reached its final

(published) form. As such, the activist strain of feminist testimonio reframes how testifying to the realities of one's social situation performs critical Freirean dialogic praxis, or integrated action and reflection.

That is, insofar as praxis is understood as a sustained commitment to simultaneous action and reflection—not an unreflexive activism or mere armchair politics—the practice of testifying necessitates that the speaker forge connections between events and understand the interconnections and interdependencies between people and places, propelling them to understanding their own situation more fully. The activity of testifying not only allows one to testify for the sake of closure, self-understanding for individual fulfillment, or gaining “recognition” from a readership, but as a means of further sharpening one's political lens, of understanding how one's own life fits into various sociopolitical landscapes and global power structures. Feminist testimonio's pedagogical potential therefore extends to the testifiers themselves, not just their readership. As such, feminist testimonios suggest we would do well to shift our gaze to a less literal notion of what it means for the genre to “work,” which necessarily begins with a probing of the straightforward witness-testifier model critics have largely espoused.

Feminist testimonio's modeling of a more bidirectional understanding of the witness-testifier paradigm that gives weight to the mutuality and interchangeability of “witness” and “testifier” in a given exchange, loosely corresponds with Megan Boler's notion of “collective witnessing,” a critical posturing that offers “one entrée into a collectivized engagement with learning to see differently” (176). While Boler's essay is

specifically concerned with classroom pedagogy, her emphasis on how a paradigm of collective witnessing brings together its participants to focus on social issues larger than themselves effectively connects to the pedagogical intentionality of testimonio in how both practitioners and readers of this writing form have much to gain by (differently) working through socially embedded critiques of racialized, gendered, and globalized power structures.

This more dynamic, fluid interpretation of the witness-testifier paradigm positions us to see how feminist testimonio offers its practitioners more than cathartic release, and in turn encourage readers to offer more than an empathetic ear. Rather than a one-dimensional teller-listener paradigm, feminist testimonios utilize the writing project to textually encode their works in ways that encourage a dynamic dialogic process between practitioners of a specific testimonio project, to build coalitional alliances across social justice projects, as well as between the practitioners and reading audience. Whether accomplished through an effective utilization of a testimonial framework in fictional narratives, or detailed descriptions of the methodological processes that underpin activist accounts, a bidirectional, dynamic model of collective witnessing that encourages dialogic processes of exchange raises the stakes for readers and tellers alike, encouraging a blurring of critique and grounded engagement, of reflexivity and alliance work, thereby moving readers from positions of critical reflexivity to postures of political alliance and solidarity.

Furthermore, as a textual social cont(r)act, I argue that through their enactment of a witness-testifier paradigm feminist testimonios nurture what Amie A. Macdonald and

Susan Sánchez Casal term “communities of meaning” enabled through “identity contingencies” (113) which “cultivate a diversity of socially embedded truth claims out of which epistemic wholeness develops” (3), an idea that I take up more fully in Section Two. Insofar as feminist testimonio offers itself as a forum for dialogic exchange (both pre- and post-textual product) of how the gendered effects of power are differently experienced by the practitioners and readers of testimonio, they highlight how knowledge production is itself a collaborative endeavor that benefits from the collective amalgamation of subject positions, experiences, and skill sets espoused by those involved.

But while the dialogic processes of feminist testimonio recognize all experiential knowledge claims as epistemically valuable, they do not understand all experiential knowledge as epistemically equal in value.<sup>35</sup> Rather, in feminist testimonio the conversation begins by placing the knowledge and insights of marginalized social actors at the center of the exchange, interrupting and inverting academic paradigms that “relegate the nonacademic collaborators as the second tier of knowledge production” (Nagar and Swarr 8). In so doing, practitioners of feminist testimonios both address and actively reject “how dialogic praxis is pushed to the margins” (8) in academic settings and claim themselves as primary knowledge producers who in turn invite their readership to learn from what their experiences and social positions have enabled them to know. Rather than glossing over the radical power asymmetries involved in the writing, publishing, and reading of testimonios, contemporary feminist testimonios take care to

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<sup>35</sup> This perspective is actively espoused by Paula L. Moya in *Learning From Experience* where she argues that the experiential knowledge of marginalized people need be recognized as epistemically privileged precisely because of what their relations to power have enabled them to see and know (132).

incorporate a discussion of these power differentials into their very narrative frameworks. As such, feminist testimonios guide their audience to different degrees through various forms of narrative address, proactively shaping the terms of conversation and exchange. Sections Three, Four, and Five take a close-up look at their specific modes of narrative address.

To argue that feminist testimonios recognize and articulate value in the intellectual, political, and creative efforts that collectively comprise a testimonio is not to say that the reader does not matter; nor is it to suggest that all feminist testimonios are uniform in form and function. Rather, it is to claim that the rhetorical and creative crafting, as well as the intellectual and political processes that inform and organize feminist testimonios, are as important to the political project of feminist testimonio as is the end textual product presented to a reading public. While an intentional queering of witness and testifier might seem to suggest that readerships are less important to feminist testimonio than to other utilizations of the genre, I paradoxically argue that this maneuver illustrates how feminist testimonios actually give *more* attention to the reasons for and terms through which they interact with diverse readerships. As counternarratives that contest the terms of the social and aesthetic through the cultural contexts in which they emerge, feminist testimonios are first and foremost “for themselves,” and yet they perform important cultural work that offers profound possibilities for cutting through pervasive individualist and first-worldist modes of thought. No doubt, the incorporation of a testimonial narrative framework in literary deployments and the blurring of witness and testifier in activist deployments speaks to how feminist testimonios carefully

*anticipate* and *direct* the reader through its modes of address. Through these tactical maneuvers, feminist testimonios proactively encode their texts in ways that enact limits on the ways in which international audiences are able to interpret, or decode, their dialogic textual writing praxis. Such “staging” is taken up at length in Section Three. *Staging Cross-Border Feminist (Reading) Alliances*

Feminist literary criticism has long recognized the activity of reading—understood as the dialogic interaction of reader and text—as a central site of ideological struggle: “We cannot afford to ignore the activity of reading, for it is here that literature is realized as *praxis*. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers” (Schweickwart 613). Through its affective resonance, literature has a way of working itself into the complexities and crevices that theory-proper cannot, and thus affords a more three-dimensional depiction of the subject matter at hand. It enables the possibility of momentarily de-centering the reader, enabling them to imaginatively occupy another subject position, and accompanying worldview, for the duration of the book. Feminist literary criticism is itself a mode of praxis that takes seriously the “worldly” situation (to reference Said) in which readers and texts come to interact, prompting readers to grapple with how our individual and relational histories affect our interactions with the texts we read. However, the project of feminist testimonio, as a socioliterary writing project (Nancy 18), necessitates a convergence of feminist literary criticism and transnational feminist theory<sup>36</sup> in order to properly articulate the scope of its aesthetic and political dimensions. As Caren Kaplan argues in “Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and

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<sup>36</sup> For an overview on the critical debates and divergent lineages that inform transnational feminisms see Nagar, Richa and Amanda Lock Swarr. “Introduction.” *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. Eds. Amanda Lock Swarr and Richa Nagar. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010.

Transnational Feminist Subjects,” since the “politics of location will determine what instances of narrative production may be read as resistant in either content or form at a specific historical moment . . . how we read testimonio (and how diverse ‘we’ are) holds as much power as the question of how this genre is produced” (Kaplan 124).

Indeed, the “risky business” of testimonio—given all the extraliterary and institutional factors working against its actualization—is well paired with transnational feminist critique, understood as a “necessarily unstable field that must contest its very definition in order to be useful” (Nagar and Swarr 12). Transnational feminist praxis operates on a comparativist model that in Chandra Mohanty’s words, seeks to provide “a way to theorize a complex relational understanding of experience, location, and history such that feminist cross-cultural work moves through the specific context to construct a real notion of universal and of democratization rather than colonization” (Mohanty 238). Mohanty’s framework privileges relationality in which tension, mutuality, and coimplication are foregrounded as a way of calling attention to moments of intersection and divergence by interweaving women’s histories (244). The practice sharpening one’s ability to see inter-personal and inter-place-based webs of relation corresponds with what Cindi Katz has referred to as “countertopographies,” a conceptual framework for mapping the interdependencies and intersections between one’s own subject position and the global processes that forge unlikely connections between seemingly disconnected spaces and people.

Taking seriously the notion that everyone can be a potential ally, feminist testimonios enact a cross-border solidarity rather than sisterhood model by utilizing their

texts to create a textual bridge that brings differently positioned global actors into contact without glossing over the radical asymmetries of power between them. As such, the reading and writing of feminist testimonio can be understood as a form of transnational feminist praxis that depends upon intra- and inter-dialogic interaction between writers and readers of a text as sustained through inward-outward modes of critical reflection. Feminist testimonios prompt their practitioners and readers to ask, “How is it that we know and understand how we are formulating our opinions? How do we arrive at certain conceptualizations of the world?” (Elenes 695). Such processes of extended critical reflexivity necessitate that speakers and readers make room for “competing” worldviews in their intellectual and emotional processing of testimonio, which catalyzes the individual work involved in de-centering our worldview as well as raising consciousness of how our worldview has been shaped by our sociopolitical positionings.

Mohanty’s comparativist framework is central for considering defensive decodings of feminist testimonio by dominantly positioned readings audiences, since as she argues, “the existence of Third World women’s narratives in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. It is the way in which they are read, understood, and located institutionally that is of paramount importance . . . the ways we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant” (78). Mohanty’s point reminds us that testimonio is not a foolproof project. Despite careful rhetorical crafting, northern readerships will inevitably enact varying levels of epistemic violence to the texts. As Beverley suggests, one of testimonio’s core principles is to bring the stability of the reader’s worldview into question, an impact enforced through

the repeated utilization of direct address (Beverley 41). For a socially privileged reader, this form of address can prove jarring, to say the least, especially when paired with repeated appeals to act in solidarity with those they might view as unalterably “other.” To guard themselves, socially privileged readers no doubt institute a series of defense mechanisms to mitigate the potential risk of having their worldview challenged.

This is something that scholar of Latin American testimonio, Kimberly Nance, has given extended consideration to in *Can Literature Promote Justice? Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio*. Nance refers to two of the most prevalent defensive posturings as “forwarding” and “fusion” (53). She defines forwarding as the process through which readers defer responsibility onto someone else, or tell themselves they are not the proper addressee (53). Fusion, by contrast, is defined as the process through which the readership ignores substantial material differences between the worlds they and the speaker inhabit. While forwarding evades responsibility by shifting the blame, fusion is accomplished through over identification: “we’re both victims in one way or another, and reading this book helped me to deal with my own oppression” (54). The risk of honest self-reflection and the internalized effects of individualist cultural grooming no doubt fuel these forms of disengagement.

Still, reading publics are not monoliths, and beyond all relevant speculation of predictable defensive forms of disengagement is the real possibility that some readers will both hear the message and enact a valid, just response. Insofar as deliberative testimonios encourage a deliberate, dialogic praxis and not an unreflexive activism, Nance outlines the ideal reader response for testimonio as a two-step process of

interpellation. The first step is a reader's affective identification with the text by imagining themselves in the same situation; by taking the "empathetic leap" that Esperanza seems to think unlikely, even as she tells her story to Behar. The second, and most important, is readers returning to acknowledge their own subject position and assessing their complicity with, and what assistance they can lend to, the situation described (63). This ideal reaction, while beginning with empathy—making the "leap" to understand and emotionally invest in the narrator's situational analysis—should therefore move beyond this as the reader acknowledges their complicities and formulates a just response. In actual practice, this two-fold response no doubt proves much messier than in its theoretical form. Indeed, Nance's model does not suggest that moments of fusion or forwarding will not occur within even an "ideal" reader's interpretive process, or that it will necessarily happen in a clear cut linear fashion. Rather, what matters is that these momentary resistances are ultimately worked through; that the reader's ego is ultimately sublimated by self-electing to posture a cross-border alliance.

These various modes of reader response serve to reinforce that testimonio is not foolproof, and in turn direct us to the importance of recognizing feminist testimonios as "staged performances" (Shank and Nagar 10) that carefully *anticipate* and *direct* readers through self-conscious modes of address. In other words, it is necessary to identify the forms of address employed by feminist testimonios that are intended to enact modes of "co-conversation" for the purpose of enabling relational and collaborative modes of democratic knowledge production. The very first-person-plural narrative framework of feminist testimonio—whether established through a polyvocal framework or through an

“I” that is “we”—embodies a collaborative approach to interpretive processes and knowledge production, while working against individualist trends in liberal autobiography and narcissistic interpretations of self-reflexivity as an invitation to “navel gaze,” and thus initiates a dialogic process of collective meaning making through its simultaneous embodiment and enactment of its method.

The specific modes of rhetorical address utilized to nudge the reader in their intended direction therefore merit close attention, especially in terms of how they vary in relation to context and issues addressed, between activist and literary accounts, as well as between feminist collectives and single-authored texts. It is untangling these differences that Section Three, Four, and Five remain especially attentive to through extended close readings through various literary, activist, place-based enactments of feminist testimonio.

As my close readings illustrate, it is through such careful consideration of feminist testimonios’ rhetorical crafted appeals that we are better able to complicate the argument that testimonio perpetuates a liberal rather than transformative politics and to understand how they self-consciously “traffic” in the language of liberal individualism through the employment of first-person narration in order to gain intelligibility within first world circuits, while always operating in excess of these very same paradigms. As prime examples of what Nance terms “deliberative testimonio” feminist testimonios reverse the anthropological gaze by offering a glimpse of how dominantly positioned readers are viewed through the lens of socially marginalized subjects (Nance 58).<sup>37</sup> It is no wonder then that this unflattering image is mitigated by appeals to recognizable tropes

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<sup>37</sup> Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* is a forceful example of this.

and plot structures so as to keep readers from a point of utter disengagement; a push-pull between biting critique and comforting familiarity. As Chela Sandoval's concept of the "clutch," allows us to consider, such a trafficking in dominant paradigms signifies a narrative strategy rather than uncritical adoption of such discourse; a working within to "break" with.

In other words, through the "dear reader" approach, feminist testimonios groom their audience as trusted—or at the very least, potential—friends in order to make their audience consider themselves capable of intervening in the social problem at hand. As Nance argues, and as especially evidenced by the deliberative strand of testimonio (and which I argue feminist testimonio should be considered), "speakers neither demand that their readers come precommitted nor that their allies be flawless . . . [they are] potential allies, educable and possibly of use in increasing the amount of justice in the world" (162). Insofar as testimonio might seem to treat its readers better than they deserve—as confidants, allies, *comadres*—it is important to recognize these speech acts as performative rather than taking them as evidentiary of a problematic pandering in order to be heard: "the description of the reader is not meant as an accurate or even complimentary reflection of the real reader; it is performative speech, seeking to make something happen by declaring it already has. The rhetorical strategy is to get readers to accept a certain definition of themselves so that they will then feel obligated to live up to it" (Nance 59).

While traditional criticism has often relied on an assumption that testimonio is primarily meant for a subaltern testifier to reach a northern audience, the bidirectional

framings of feminist testimonios demand that we reconsider this assumption by attending to their cultivation of horizontal, dialogic relationships. Understood as grounded method and theory, feminist testimonios also provide a way for social justice projects devoted to gender equity and a working through and across (social) difference *to speak to each other*, providing a textual forum for forging connections and sharing strategies:

For readers who identify with collective movements, whether they are active participants or not, narratives coming out of a shared experience offer new avenues for activism and self-understanding, new models of remembering. Such narratives can enable access to and potential recognition of the incommensurable differences between the teller's experience and that of the reader, making possible circuits of connection across differences, and circuits of difference across connection. (Schaffer and Smith 27)

In other words, the project of feminist testimonio is not simply an attempt to "reach" dominantly positioned audiences and win them over. Similar to how the queering of the witness-testifier model stakes a radical claim that the value of feminist testimonio is not reliant on an outside party to bestow it with "recognition," feminist testimonio claims for itself a dialogic space that allows individual social justice projects that deploy it as a methodology to speak to and learn from each other. Indeed, while conducting interviews for *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle*, Margaret Randall was repeatedly informed of how texts emanating from the Cuban revolution played a formative pedagogical role in the crafting of Nicaraguan revolutionary methods.

This included Randall's own *Cuban Women Now*, leading Randall to define *Sandino's Daughters* as "an important tool" (i).

To recap, my project argues that feminist testimonios self-consciously utilize careful, rhetorical craftings that *construct* cross-border readerships by actively anticipating and redirecting their cultural biases and defensive disengagements. As such, feminist testimonios embody a delicate yet fierce balance of political generosity and focused intentionality by guiding readerships through cultivated forms of rhetorical address, which necessarily correspond with the specific forms and functions of individual projects and contexts. While in daily life the extent to which marginalized social actors are called upon to inform and educate dominant subjects serves to perpetuate asymmetrical power relations, feminist testimonio willfully engages in this pedagogical pursuit in an effort to reach as many potential allies as possible, but always by proactively defining the terms with which they engage with dominantly positioned reading audiences (Nance 89).

*Translating and Transforming Worlds Through Textual Cont(r)act*

As argued by Nagar and Swarr, "[c]laiming more spaces for dialogic praxis necessitates constant renegotiations and retheorizations of power through alliances, languages, and critiques that disrupt dominant logics and imaginaries" (18). Feminist testimonios build upon this realization by taking aim at the cultural imaginary and taking seriously how processes of meaning making result in both ideological and material effects. Such works safeguard against the mindless consumption and fetizishization of their truth claims through an insistence on a bidirectional social pact. This is specifically

manifested through a self-conscious framing of themselves as cultural “work,” an active blurring of witness-testifier paradigm that attests to the value of the entire process of the testimonio project rather than merely the end textual product, and by enacting forms of narrative address that prompt their readerships to imagine themselves as potential allies.

By using creative writing as a tool to write against received dominant cultural scripts, feminist testimonios are about more than gaining “recognition” for the lives at the center of their texts. They are a literal embodiment of the theory and methods they espouse even as they resist a clear separation between the product called testimonio and the process of creating it. As such, they at once model and teach their process and methodology for diverse audiences. Feminist testimonios should, therefore, be understood as an exercise in cultural translation that enjoin different cultural and material worlds by bringing diverse authors and readerships into critical proximity, a textual cont(r)act that privileges intimacy even while distance is maintained. In its more nuanced goals, the work of feminist testimonio is equally invested in altering the worldview of its readers as it is in ending a specific instance of injustice. Or rather, feminist testimonio realizes these effects as deeply entwined. By penetrating the cultural imaginary, feminist testimonios acknowledge and enact the interconnectedness of the material and discursive, and recognize how one’s worldview directly affects ones actions within the world.

Thus, while I argue that feminist testimonio is, in fact, a textual-tactical recruiting method, the collective project is just as invested in bringing readers to question the assumed stability of their worldview and to more fully realize the messy webs of entanglement between themselves and the lives at the center of the text: “Far from

transparent or simplistic propaganda, the future orientation of deliberative testimonio requires a hybrid and much more sophisticated rhetorical strategy, one that will persuade readers to think critically about the world at the same time that it confronts them with a personal obligation to combat injustice” (Nance 38). Through their self-conscious framings, both literary and activist strands of feminist testimonio teach their audiences how to better see and understand the asymmetrical interdependencies between themselves and the women’s lives at the center of a given account, and to understand how these relational webs are connected to processes of globalization. Section Two puts forth an understanding of feminist testimonio as *methodology* by highlighting how they employ storytelling to at once enable and enact the cross-border alliances they call for.

***Section Two: Truth Telling Through Tale Telling: Feminist Perspectives on the Epistemological Relevance of Experience and the Uses of Storytelling in Feminist Polyvocal Testimonios***

“I’m telling you stories. Trust me.” ~Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*

“The truth, these stories are nothing but story, bits of string, odds and ends found here and there, embroidered together to make something new. I have invented what I do not know and exaggerated what I do to continue the family tradition of telling healthy lies. If, in the course of my inventing, I have inadvertently stumbled on the truth, *perdónenme*. ~Sandra Cisneros, *Caramelo*

“But how does one know truth when one finds it? Truth isn't a property of an event itself; truth is a property of an account of the event. As such, it has to be perceived and processed by someone, or else it couldn't be framed in language to count as an account at all.”

~Kay Lane Scheppele, “Telling Stories,” *Michigan Law Review*

What is the epistemological relevance of storytelling? And what is the relationship between experience, storytelling, and social knowledge? How do even the most fictionalized stories create meaning out of the seemingly mundane details and “raw” material of our daily lives, and how might a careful consideration of this process serve to intervene in ongoing debates within Feminist Studies and Cultural Studies on the validity

of experience as an epistemic resource? Finally, how specifically does testimonio, as an experiential-based socioliterary genre, engage the “problem” of experience?

Such questions are compellingly taken up in the sphere of witness testimony by Nora Strejilevich, a political prisoner during the Dirty War in Argentina and *testimoniadora* of the literary testimonio, *Una Sola Muerte Numerosa/A Single, Numberless Death*. In her article “Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth,” Strejilevich considers what is enabled through testimonial writing, and in the process articulates an important differentiation between legal depositions that privilege unmediated fact and objectivity and witness testimony that is subjective and intimate, complete with ambiguities and disruptions. As Strejilevich argues, a “witness account that is not allowed to voice the intimate, subjective . . . should not be called testimony, but rather, a deposition” (703). Indeed, to suggest that legal depositions privilege unmediated fact is not to say that they themselves are not subjective and crafted, only that such narrative disruptions and ambiguities are actively discouraged.

Strejilevich’s differentiation between “testimony” and “deposition” therefore takes issue with the narrow ways that “[s]ociety wants to use witnesses’ accounts as evidence, and [how] testimonies are condemned in case they do not match evidence collected by other means” (702). Strejilevich’s critique resounds closely with Joan Scott’s warnings against “the evidence of experience,” and argues that what society stands to learn from witness testimony is firmly rooted in its intimate, subjective mode of address. In arguing that the “truthfulness” of testimony—understood as a narratively encoded account of an objective event—lies outside a juridical model of truth,

Strejilevich takes specific aim at the tendency to reduce testimony to positivist models of objectivity. In so doing, Strejilevich indirectly critiques those who dismiss Menchú's account because of its deviation from "official" fact-based accounts.

Far from tolerating the disruptions and digressions of subjective testimony in order to glean from it concrete names, dates, and locations—the heralded facts upon which a legal conviction is predicated—Strejilevich demands a rethinking of the type of knowledge witness testimony enables. She argues that the substance of testimony—the understanding, perspective, and analysis it provides—can be true even if and when it gets the concrete details wrong and therefore that its unique contribution to truth resides *precisely within* its subjective framework (709). Strejilevich further interrupts the assumed equivalence of "truth" with "objectivity" through her suggestion that "by falling into the snare of objectivity testimony betrays itself . . . testimony should stress just truthfulness, not objectivity," a claim that surely gives most of us pause (709). Are not truthfulness and objectivity one in the same? Do we not strive for a more objective perspective in order to arrive at truth? Even in the recent work of post-positivist reality theory that insists on the social situatedness of any knowledge claim, objectivity is considered a thing of value. While we might work with subjective experiences for what they can contribute to social knowledge, we work with them *to arrive at* less false, more accurate truth. And yet, in Strejilevich's view, the truth-value of testimony, as a mediated narrative account of an event, cannot and should not be separated from its subjective character. In her formulation, "objectivity" and "truthfulness" are alternate, equally valid, pathways for arriving at more complete social truth.

Strejilevich is not alone in conjecturing towards a more expansive understanding of “truthfulness” that falls outside the paradigmatic confines of unmediated objectivity, and which therefore might aid in more productive frameworks for understanding the epistemological relevance of experience. Her assertion that testimony can convey truth even when it gets the facts wrong is reinforced by Alicia Kozameh in the preface to her literary testimonio, *Steps Under Water*: “The substance of the story, of every episode, is real; it happened. Either I myself or other *compañeras* lived it. I have, however, replaced names or possibly details that in no way affect the essence of what occurred” (xvi). Kozameh’s careful word choice, of asserting how the “substance of the story” is “real” and that her alteration of names and details “in no way affect[s] the essence of what occurred” again mirrors the subtle, but key, differentiation between “truth” and “truth-value” (“truthfulness” in Strejilevich’s language) that I am concerned with in this chapter. Whereas juridical models of truth argue that “the devil is in the details,” within Kozameh’s logic, the details are secondary to the “substance” of what the narrative conveys. While the objective facts (read: evidence) provide *knowledge* of a given account, it is only through a subjective account (read: experience) that we begin to *understand* what it means.

In *Reading Autobiography*, Smith and Watson likewise argue that life narrative, as a self-referential practice “redefines the terms of what we call ‘truth’” (17). This is because “autobiographical writing cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple fact . . . it resides outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood” (17). Life narrative utilizes subjective memory as an archival resource to convey the author’s

perceived truth, and the author's truth is itself responsive to their contextual social locations, experiences, and worldview. Insofar as memory is itself a shifty and shifting resource, and life writing practices are always performative, the narrative form is utilized to effectively convey to its readers the authors' situated interpretation of events, and thus offers truth in a subjective register. If "testimony should stress just truthfulness, not objectivity," as Strejilevich suggests," it offers truth that is rooted in cognitive understanding and social knowledge rather than fact-based objectivity.

Considering the storytelling methods undertaken by feminist testimonios to at once document existing power inequalities and to imagine more egalitarian futures, this chapter considers how the recognized "truth-value" of life stories for generating social knowledge *generally*, might also aid us in *specifically* considering how testimonio as methodology carefully constructs experiential-based narratives to convey more accurate analyses of power from the perspective of those most marginalized. This section takes a closer look at the processes involved in how testimonio utilizes the personal for an impersonal effect to arrive at more complete—and complex—social truth.

Specifically, this section considers how the polyvocal frameworks of contemporary feminist testimonios, and particularly the collaborative efforts undertaken by its activist strain, provide crucial insight on how experience must be "worked with" in order to constitute a form of social knowledge. Given testimonio's commitment to serve as a counternarrative that contests dominant renditions of history from the standpoint of the oppressed, this chapter argues that polyvocal feminist testimonio can be viewed as a writing praxis that serves as an applied example of post-positivist realist theory, a body of

thought that understands experiences, like identities, to be simultaneously real and constructed, contextual, and relational, therefore offering social “truth-value,” even as they are always socially-situated, theoretical mediations of objective “truth.”

A brief note on my terminology within this section: In working across diverse bodies of thought certain discursive conflicts arise. I maintain these language differences communicate more about whom different theories are addressing rather than about a conceptual incompatibility of the ideas they put forth. Specifically, a non-positivist understanding of “objectivity,” while productive for post-positivist realist theory’s purposes, proves unproductive and largely over-determined in conversations of testimonio, precisely because of its association with legal interpretations of witness testimony. For the purposes of this chapter then, I frequently reframe these language differences in terms of “truth” and “truth-value.” While “truth” is often narrowly interpreted to reference factual accuracy, positivism, and objectivity, I use the phrase “truth-value” to call attention its own situatedness; while it may not get all of the facts straight, there is nonetheless valuable social knowledge that can be gleaned through the knowledge claims it puts forth. As such, the “truth-value” of experiential-based narrative accounts is entwined with their situated knowledge claims. The subjective dimension cannot be “extracted” and nor is it desirable for it to be; it is only by conveying and prompting readers to learn from its subjective dimensions that the narrative is able to contribute to a more accurate, less false view of the world through a demystification of power relations.

In Chapter Three: “Beyond the Essentialist and Postmodernist Binary: Post-Positivist Realist Theory and the Epistemological Relevance of Experience,” I outline the central premises of the emerging field of post-positivist realist theory in order to highlight its commitment to realizing experience as a vital, yet fraught, tool in feminist theorizing and in articulating subjugated knowledges, as well as to draw parallels between this body of thought and politicized life writing practices that recognize memory-based experiential knowledge as at once real and constructed. I use this discussion to then take a closer look at why storytelling is not considered a reliable source of social knowledge and to illustrate how rethinking the relationship between the subjective and objective can help us to rethink the interconnectedness of stories and truth. In Chapter Four: “Telling Stories, Writing Praxis: Decolonizing Knowledge Production through Feminist Storytelling Methodologies,” I engage with feminist scholars who theorize how experiential stories need to be “worked with” in order to process them into an epistemological resource. Here I draw upon key passages in polyvocal feminist testimonios to illustrate where and how they highlight dialogue as a critical process in their consciousness-raising efforts, and how they extend the dialogic function of their story-based methodologies to their reading audience in an effort to expand the pedagogical reach of their interpretive practices.

### **Chapter Three: Beyond the Essentialist and Postmodernist Binary: Post-Positivist Realist Theory and the Epistemological Relevance of Experience**

“[O]ur experiences do not have self-evident meanings, for they are in part theoretical affairs; our access to our remotest personal feelings is dependent on social narratives, paradigms, and even ideologies”  
~Satya Mohanty, “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition”

Questions of experience and identity—how to frame, understand, and draw upon these resources—have long plagued postcolonial and feminist scholars.<sup>38</sup> Conceptual imprecision and critics not having an agreed upon definition of what, precisely, “experience” *is* have no doubt served to fuel the experience debates. My own working definition of “experience” in this chapter argues that our experiences are always “real” and “constructed,” at once referring to actual, outward, objective events, but always necessarily filtered through our subjective lens as embodied subjects, and further shaped by language and available social narratives as we attempt to convey our experience to others. Thus, while experiences refer outwardly to actual events in the world, experience itself is always a narratively crafted account of the event, interpreted, processed, and therefore affected, by our locations within our worldscape.

If experience at one time constituted the mainframe of activist feminist consciousness-raising efforts through the assertion that the “personal is political,” it is now often considered suspect at best, irrelevant at worst. In addition to not having an agreed upon definition of what experience *is*, shifting theoretical trends and the increasing professionalization of Women’s Studies have no doubt contributed to its bad reputation. More still, the insipid binary between essentialist and postmodernist perspectives on experience has been perpetuated by overly simplistic, careless interpretations of the nuanced arguments made by feminist standpoint theorists and

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<sup>38</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988; Brown, Wendy. “Wounded Attachments.” *Political Theory* 21:3 (1993): 390-410.

postmodernists who have dared to stake claims on the uses of experience.<sup>39</sup> These oft caricatured renditions of qualified, careful arguments have led to a gradual retreat from the subject of experience, leaving the dominant currents of feminist theory with the unsophisticated conclusions that essentialism is “bad” and postmodernism is “good,” with, of course, a caveat reserved for the necessary evil of “strategic essentialism.” However, it is my contention that even in the canonical postmodernist feminist texts that are called upon to discredit experiential knowledge claims, the arguments do not so much dismiss experience as much as qualify how it must be worked with to yield reliable social knowledge.

For instance, in the renowned “The Evidence of Experience,” Joan Scott warns against historians interpreting testimony and archival accounts as representative of an unmediated “real” (776). Responding to the trends in social history projects to offset received historical narratives through the counter-testimony of marginalized social actors, Scott’s qualm is less with the evocation of experience in scholarship and more with the terms through which it is engaged. By social historians refusing a critical engagement with experiential narrative accounts, of letting them “speak for themselves,” Scott argues that “experience” becomes configured as “evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world” (777). Scott’s contention is that

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<sup>39</sup> In these debates, feminist standpoint theory is often charged with a reductive biologic determinism, in which identities are considered to be pre-given and stagnant. In contrast, postmodernism is thought to recognize all identities as socially constructed and consequently unreal—as performative costumes to take on and off. Within this logic, everyone becomes a cultural hybrid; boundaries are infinitely permeable, identities are only reactionary and limiting, and therefore the only hope for liberatory politics is to reject any and all identity claims, unless they are self-consciously and ironically adapted in order to subvert them, or used “strategically” for the purposes of rights-based organizing (i.e. “strategic essentialism”).

rather than recognizing experience as an account of an event filtered through a critical interpretive lens that people utilize to make sense of the material and causal conditions of their daily lives, and how these conditions correlate with social institutions and relations of power, social historians have tended to call upon experiential accounts as positivist counter-evidence; as accumulated social facts strewn together in narrative form, without considering the interpretive practices involved in the telling and crafting of the account. Kimberly Nance has launched a parallel complaint toward critics of *testimonio*, suggesting that they “have agreed more or less politely not to criticize *testimonio* seriously as text, and/or to substitute either admiration for its producers or suspicion of their motives for any politically engaged textual analysis of the product” (12). Nance’s point echoes Scott’s in the sense that she argues the epistemological value of experience is lost without a serious, focused attempt to understand how power structures actively inform the ways that socially located speakers understand, feel, and narrate their life experiences. In this sense, it is how we *read* and *interpret* *testimonio* as a self-consciously crafted form of experiential-based social knowledge that holds the most epistemological potential.

Similarly, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak warns against taking testimony as signaling a “pure” form of consciousness, understood as an essentializing and patronizing form of engagement, and suggests that the silences—what the narration does *not* narrate—are vital components to the testimony itself (81). Spivak also importantly emphasizes how any attempt to engage with the “subaltern other” on behalf of “benevolent” academics perpetuates a degree of epistemic violence; there are no

uncompromised spaces from which to assert knowledge claims. Indeed, the very act of one's experiential account "being heard" is laden with compromises and contradictions.

These collective points made by Scott, Nance, and Spivak are crucial for reminding those working with experiential knowledge claims to hold narrated individual experiences in close tension with the larger structural forces that produce and enable those experiences. As Scott suggests, it is "not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (779). This sentiment is not incompatible with Wendy Brown's point in "Wounded Attachments" that politicized identities are both "product of and 'reaction' to" existing forms of power and domination, and are artificial social groupings that congeal in relation to socially imposed (outside) conditions (402). Without further interrogating what experiential accounts mean—and why they have been told in a particular way to achieve their desired effects—scholars miss an opportunity to decode these narratively encoded events, an interpretive process that yields a much richer analysis than when they are simply taken at face value. Such decoding more broadly affords a critical opportunity to understand the complex contestations of knowledge and power that are enabled through the narration of experience.

Although their points of intervention differ, ranging from interrupting naturalized practices and assumptions of social historians and postcolonial scholars (Scott, Nance, Spivak), to questioning the political utility of identity politics (Brown), I argue that these texts which are often called upon to reinforce the entrenched binarism of the essentialist/postmodernist debates on "experience" instead challenge it in that none of

these scholars work *against* the idea that claims of experience must be interpreted, worked through, and placed in dialogue with other voices and social forces in order to begin to understand these pieces of situated knowledge in relation to the whole. It is this more nuanced reading that is too often missed by scholars looking to purge experiential knowledge claims from the feminist project. As Scott herself states, “[e]xperience is not a term we can do without . . . [it] is so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion” (797). Rather than fully discounting experience, what separates these thinkers is a matter of degrees of where their “conclusions” place them in relation to what precisely the epistemic value of experience is and how to engage in the delicate balance of critically engaging with and learning from, without wholly discounting, experience-based accounts.<sup>40</sup>

In fact, while these cautionary tales provide a much needed warning on how less careful processing of experience can lead to the production of faulty knowledge claims, the real problem is that none go on to articulate a theoretically cautious, yet pragmatic vision of *how* to derive epistemic value from experiential claims. As a feminist literary critic who reads stories as narratively-coded forms of social knowledge, and who recognizes experience as an essential tool that offers inspiration and insight for these accounts, I find the current terrain of the feminist experience debates to be, quite simply, unsatisfying. Rather than unproductively position ourselves on one side or the other, I suggest we take a closer look at what experience *can* contribute to more accurate social knowledge, and how it must be *processed* to reach its potential contribution. More than

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<sup>40</sup> In this sense, the immediate theoretical/institutional contexts that these scholars are writing from/to/within largely determine their line of argument.

following academic theoretical trends, this undertaking is motivated by a desire to work against the field's academic/activist divide and to renew feminist theory's relevance to social justice struggles. As argued by Stone-Mediatore, "[o]ur new distrust of experience-oriented narratives risks a dismissal of such texts that is just as epistemologically and politically dangerous as the earlier positivism. In fact, despite academic critiques of experience, many social struggles . . . continue to rely on stories of experience to bring public attention to their concerns" (1). The proliferation of polyvocal feminist testimonios is a powerful case in point.

In my journey to arrive at a more complex understanding of the epistemological relevance of experience—somewhere beyond taking experience as positivist evidence without wholly discounting its potential contribution to social knowledge—I have found the emerging body of post-positivist realist theory to be a theoretically nuanced, yet pragmatic, body of thought that draws upon productive pieces of feminist standpoint theory and postmodernist critiques to articulate its own negotiated position on the question of experience. This negotiated standpoint allows post-positivist realist theory to recognize experience as simultaneously real and constructed: it is real insofar as it refers outwardly to actual events and conditions in the material world, it is constructed in that the telling of an experiential event necessitates it be communicated within a narrative form, which can only ever serve as a socially situated interpretation of an objective event.

It is Satya P. Mohanty's "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition" that is most often credited with laying the foundation of this body of work. Explicit in his goal to interrupt the essentialist/postmodernist debate

on experience, Mohanty makes the bold proposition: “What if we gave up both radical perspectivism and the dream of a ‘view from nowhere,’ in order to grant that all the knowledge we can ever have is necessarily dependent on theories and perspectives? We might then be able to . . . understand how theory-laden and socially constructed experiences can lead to a knowledge that is accurate and reliable” (48). Mohanty’s position is to frame knowledge as a human enterprise, and as such always socially entrenched, confined to existing ideas on how to create knowledge and inheriting interpretive paradigms for understanding our world. For Mohanty, this realization does not void the search for more accurate depictions of social relations. Rather, he suggests it is a necessary step in order to shift social relations of dominance to mutually beneficial relations between people from different social locations: “It does not urge us to give up the job of interpreting the world (in the interest of changing it) but instead points out how the possibility of interpreting our world accurately depends fundamentally on our coming to know what it would take to change it, on our identifying the central relations of power and privilege that sustain it and make the world what it is” (53). Insofar as dominant social scripts mystify the relations of power that perpetuate systemic inequalities, Mohanty argues that oppositional social movements and knowledge production—such as testimonio—are necessary to produce more accurate sociohistorical understanding.

Post-positivist realist theory argues that if we are ever to use our experiential knowledge for such ends, we must first understand what, precisely, “experience” is, and therefore gives extended attention to creating a conceptual understanding of a term that has generated much confusion. As Paula Moya articulates in “Postmodernism,

‘Realism,’ and the Politics of Identity,” experience is “the fact of personally observing, encountering, or undergoing a particular event or situation. But this definition of experience is admittedly subjective. Experiences are not wholly external events; they do not just happen. Experiences happen to us, and it is our theoretically mediated interpretation of an event that makes it an ‘experience.’ The meanings we give our experiences are inescapably conditioned by ideologies and ‘theories’ through which we view the world” (“Realist” 81). As Moya’s definition suggests, since we ourselves are socially situated beings, inevitably bound to our partial perspectives, any account we provide of an experiential event will necessarily be affected by our social location and can only be conveyed through available narrative structures. Hence experiences, like identities, are both “real” and “constructed”; while they refer to objective events, they can only be articulated through subjective modes of communication. Even when we try to only give the “facts” of a situation, what we choose to include or exclude as factually relevant will be subjectively decided upon in reference to our social location.

While post-positivist realist theory learns from postmodernism, it does so for the purpose of effecting positive social change. For what use is a theory of experience and identity if it does not help us to creatively rework power inequalities in the world?<sup>41</sup> This has much to do with where post-positivist notions of identity and experience are coming from: scholars whose geopolitical, ethnic, gendered, and sexual locations place them on

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<sup>41</sup> Paula Moya has undertaken much of the recent work on post-positivist realist theory, and it is no coincidence that much of her motivation for and application of this theory is located in a key site of intergroup encounters: the situated context of U.S. classrooms. As Moya explains, “I agree that in theory boundaries are infinitely permeable and power may be amorphous. The difficulty is that people do not live in an entirely abstract or discursive realm. They live as biologically and temporally limited, as well as socially situated, human beings . . . A politics of discourse that does not provide for some sort of bodily or concrete action outside the realm of the academic text will forever be inadequate to change the difficult ‘reality’ of our lives” (79).

the social margins, and who because of this, experience identity as something *very real* in that it influences their ability to conduct their daily lives. While this realness is not in relation to a biologic determinism, it is real in the sense of “causal” relations. Though identity may in fact be socially constructed and policed, indexical and relational, it nevertheless gives way to “real”—as in felt, experienced, and actualized—*effects*. Insofar as racialized class systems, heternormative matrices, first worldlist assumptions, and gendered divisions of labor acutely inform the lives of social actors who fall outside the provisions of these arbitrary but powerful and consequential rules, experience, as causally related to identity formation, will continue to matter to those who are ostracized because of their social location.

Within the framework of post-positivist realist theory social “identity” is understood as necessarily *constitutive* of our life experiences, it does not predate them. One of its core principles is that humans do not have stagnant and innate characteristics based on social group. Rather, social groups are understood as developing in response to imposed social conditions. As such, Moya argues that identities should be understood as “nonessential and evolving products that emerge . . . between how subjects of consciousness identify themselves and how they are identified by others” (“Mobilizing” 97). Cultural identities therefore fall into two primary categories, “ascriptive” (imposed identities and/or social categories that come from the outside) and “subjective” (our individual sense of self, performances of self-identification), which are also internally fraught, and always in dynamic relationship with each other (“Mobilizing” 99). Identity is not something we “are,” but is a causal relationship between people and things. Post-

positivist realist thought therefore negotiates a cautious version of standpoint theory that contests a wholly determined relationship between one's social positioning and experiential knowledge while still understanding how one's positioning is a central factor in what and how one knows:

[W]hat we 'know' is intimately tied up with how we conceptualize the world and who we understand ourselves to be in it. Our conceptual frameworks are thus inseparable from how we comprehend ourselves in terms of our gender, cultural, race, sexuality, ability, religion, age, and profession—even when we are not consciously aware of how these aspects of ourselves affect our points of view. Our identities thus shape our interpretive perspectives and bear on how we understand . . . our everyday experiences. (“Mobilizing” 102)

Because our social locatedness affects what and how we see, and what and how we see is causally linked to the life experiences we have from our social location, Moya, like Strejilevich, suggests that rather than trying to overcome our subjective stance we instead treat our experiences as “epistemic resources” (“Mobilizing” 96). By working through and understanding how social location affects our worldview, we are able to reframe experiential accounts as resources that shed light on our relationship to power in order to develop a more accurate understanding of social relations.

Moya summarizes the six central and interconnected principles of post-positivist realist theory as follows: 1) reinforcing social categories multiply inform an individual's identity and causally relate to the experiences she will have; 2) an individual's

experiences will necessarily influence, though not rigidly determine the formation of her cultural identity; 3) there is always possibility of error and accuracy in our interpretation of events and our interpretation may change over time and circumstance; 4) some identities have greater epistemic value than others;<sup>42</sup> 5) our ability to understand aspects of our daily lives depend upon our ability to recognize the systemic consequences of our social location; 6) oppositional struggle is fundamental to understanding our world more accurately (“Realism” 81-86).

Although cloaked in the language of “identity,” these principles work toward a more nuanced understanding of what aspects of experience are useful, including a reconsideration of what constitutes “standpoint” in standpoint theory.<sup>43</sup> Is it strictly the perspectives voiced by marginalized subjects (an interpretation that has led to its dismissal as an essentialist framework), or is it a more self-conscious articulation of what these experiences and perspectives mean? In Sandra Harding’s *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women’s Lives* (1991), she argues: “The terms ‘women’s standpoint’ and ‘women’s perspective’ are often used interchangeably, and ‘women’s perspective’ suggests the actual perspective of actual women—what they in fact see. But it cannot be that women’s experiences in themselves or the things women say provide

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<sup>42</sup> This is not due to some “innate” trait, but is rather due to what the social locations of marginalized actors has enabled them to see and know, in addition to subjugated knowledge providing important viewpoints that importantly contest and enrich the dominant perspectives privileged in knowledge production. Thus, while all identities are epistemically useful, they are not epistemically equal in value.

<sup>43</sup> As these central principles illustrate, in many ways, post-positivist realist theory learns from, builds upon, and extends the core principles of standpoint theory. Concerned with pluralizing the subject positions considered to inhabit Enlightenment’s universal “I,” while also critiquing Western science’s positivist frameworks that privilege neutrality and unmediated objectivity, standpoint theory is committed to the idea of situated knowledge. Standpoint theory claims that knowledge is always subjectively and contextually located, rather than postured as the long assumed disembodied, “view from nowhere.” It argues that by acknowledging the situatedness and particularity of human subjects, and thinking from their standpoint of being in the world, knowledge producers are better positioned to generate more reliable, or less false, knowledge.

reliable grounds for knowledge claims about nature and social relations” (123). Rather, for a “position to count as a standpoint, rather than as a claim—equally valuable but for different reasons—for the importance of listening to women tell us about their lives and experiences, we must insist on an objective location—women’s lives—as the place from which feminist research should begin” (123). As Harding argues, it is not necessarily “women’s experience” that leads to social knowledge, or what she terms “strong objectivity,” but rather the self-consciously assumed *standpoint* achieved through an analytic processing of the experiential information derived from the perspective of women as subjects.

A critical standpoint then, is a *learned* perspective; it is not something we innately possess, no matter what our subject position. Whereas individual women’s opinions and experiences would constitute a *claim*—valuable as an initial interpretation of an event in their lives, as Harding suggests—it is through a collection of several women’s truth claims and systemic analytical processing of them in relation to their varied contexts and social locations that a *standpoint* begins to materialize. Post-positivist realist theory’s notion of theory-mediated experience understands experience as offering an important subjective entry point in order to better understand the objective reality of people’s lives and their relations to power. In Mohanty’s words, “[s]ince ‘experience’ is only the raw material for the kind of political and social knowledge that constitutes a feminist standpoint, it cannot guarantee or ground it” (53). However, without it we would be unable to articulate a feminist standpoint at all.

Post-positivist realist theory's investment in the causal linkage between social identity and experience is central to countering essentialist claims to identity and for complicating how and in what capacity experiential accounts become epistemically useful. By highlighting how one's social location does not outright determine the experiences one will have, post-positivist realist theory reinforces how social identities are *multiply informed* (an important corrective to earlier models of standpoint theory that lacked an intersectional approach) and how the development of a critical posture is a fought for perspective: "[t]he constructed nature of experience shows why there is no guarantee that my experiences will lead me to some common core of values or beliefs that link me with every other member of my cultural group" (Mohanty 47).

While it may be true that marginalized subjects are less resistant to coming to critical consciousness because they have more to gain and less to lose than dominantly situated subjects who structurally benefit from others' exploitation, critical consciousness is necessarily a learned posture. The more we understand the systemic workings of power, the more able we are to understand how the realities of our daily lives correspond to our entangled location(s) within these relational webs. This claim draws upon a Marxist principle that those most affected by power are in the best position to understand its workings because of its felt effects in their daily lives. Such critical experiential accounts by marginalized subjects are potentially more epistemically valuable not because of embodied characteristics, but rather because of what their relationship to power has enabled them to see and know, and how they can use this knowledge to contest

oppressive dominant cultural scripts. As Paulo Freire asks, “[w]ho are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?” (45).

To return to the “problem” of experience, post-positivist realist theory highlights how descriptive accounts of happenings in our daily lives are not valuable in and of themselves. They cannot and should not be used as straightforward, unproblematized “evidence.” Rather, their value is derived in what critically processed experiential accounts can offer to projects committed to producing more accurate social knowledge. Experience’s use-value in social justice projects is therefore largely dependent on our ability to recognize how larger structures of power inform our daily realities and our proximity to or distance from dominant social structures. In other words, the epistemological usefulness of experience lies in what its interpretive processing might enable and uncover in regards to social relations.

This is why within post-positivist realist theory experience is realized as a *potential* resource, which recognizes that our personal interpretations of experiential events may be flawed insofar as our readings of life events may be masked in cloaks of defensiveness or misinterpretations due to insufficient information or lack an understanding of structural relations of power. As socially situated beings it is probable that our understanding of certain life events may change based on our development of critical consciousness or upon receiving previously unknown information that propels us to rethink our interpretation of an event. As Carolyn Steedman argues, our interpretation of life events might also be altered precisely through the very act of telling: “visions change, once any story is told; ways of seeing are altered” (22). This is why Satya

Mohanty argues that experience can “lie” to us just as it can reveal; that it is not innately good or bad. While the shifty and shifting nature of experiential knowledge claims might make some scholars skeptical of experience as a valid epistemological resource, I argue that it usefully reflects the dynamicity of how power operates since power structures themselves are not static, and are always in a relational state of flux. Additionally, since the development of critical consciousness is a continual process, such alterations in our ways of seeing are both expected and welcomed.

Precisely because understandings of objective events can only be arrived at by working through subjective accounts of said events, Mohanty argues “we need a conception of experience . . . that will allow for both legitimate and illegitimate experience, enabling us to see experience as a source of both real knowledge and social mystification. Both the knowledge and the mystification are, however, open to analysis on the basis of empirical information about our social situation and a theoretical account of our current social and political arrangements” (Mohanty 54). This is especially true when experiential narratives are placed in dialogue with empirically based evidence that supports their qualitative knowledge claims and yet cannot provide a nuanced *interpretation* of the social conditions it reports on, suggesting an interrelatedness of the subjective and objective that I explore in the next section.

Experience-based narratives remain a vital resource in articulating knowledge claims about one’s world and in taking an agential stance against social processes beyond one’s control. Thus, while not the only meaningful source of social knowledge, experience remains a significant one, especially for social subjects who do not have

access to formal education and who have been relegated to objects of study by academic “experts.” As argued by Shari Stone-Mediatore, “when we treat experience-based narratives as mere ideological artifacts, we reinforce the disempowerment of people who have been excluded from official knowledge production, for we deny epistemic value from a central means by which such people can take control over their own representations” (2). This is what we lose sight of when scholars assign themselves as sole interpreters of others’ experiences and assume that the research and archival subjects with whom we engage lack the tools to provide critical interpretations of their own experiences: “[w]hen scholars focus on criticizing ‘experience,’ we alienate our work from these practical struggles. We may address others’ stories as sites for our deconstructive analysis, but we forfeit learning from them and building theories responsive to them” (Stone-Mediatore 1).

Such arrogant postures partake in the undesirable exercise of reinforcing the academy as sole site of knowledge production, simultaneously perpetuating distrust for the knowledges produced within its faction. To avoid furthering the fissure between academic and applied feminisms we need to give careful consideration to the interpretive processes necessary for processing an experience’s sociopolitical truth-value. More still, when we as scholars begin to consider how people make use of experiential narratives to assert knowledge claims in their daily lives, we begin to realize how they themselves *already* understand experience as a theoretically mediated event and epistemic resource that can be used to call attention to an unjust social order in order to negotiate, analyze, and reinterpret power relations in their daily lives. Indeed, we might find that theoretical

debates on the uses of experience are far less sophisticated than the ways in which people utilize this resource in daily practice and in the creation of social knowledge happening outside of academic walls.

Post-positivist realist theory attempts to build a responsive theory of the epistemic value of experience in the pursuit of more democratic social knowledge in a way that demystifies dominant power structures. It does so through an insistence that it is possible to learn ways of interpreting our experiences in ways that enrich societal understanding and provide more accurate social knowledge of how unequal power relations are maintained. It prompts us to critically read and interpret experience not as a sealed, self-evident event, but rather as an event always already causally related to systemic workings of power and social location(s). It rejects both positivist readings of experience and a full-fledged dismissal of experience in favor of a pragmatic perspective: that experience can and does yield relevant social knowledge, but that our interpretation and processing of experiential accounts must be cautious and deliberate.

As Carolyn Steedman argues, “the point [of experience] doesn’t lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time at which they happened; the only point lies in interpretation. The past is re-used through the agency of social information, and that interpretation of it can only be made with what people know of a social world and their place within it” (5). If the truth-value of experience lies in its interpretation and not in the specific event it narrates, then we must be vigilant in conceiving interpretive processes that can aid in the extraction of truth-value from a given experiential narrative. In other words, if positivist frameworks overestimate and postmodernist frameworks

underestimate the ability of an individual to communicate a reliable interpretation of experience, then post-positivist theory argues we must rethink experience as at the crossroads of the microcosm and macrocosm; to consider how it is possible to self-consciously process, analyze, and interpret our memory-based experiences even as we recognize how we are constituted by them.

In its recognition of experience as both “real” and “theoretically-mediated,” a central issue post-positivist theory must address is *what types of interpretive practices are most likely to contribute to more accurate social knowledge that highlight how dominant power structures are maintained*. Indeed, while post-positivist realist theory’s notion of “mediated” experience is helpful for thinking how experience can be worked with to become a reliable epistemic resource, it does not specifically attend to what forms of mediation this might take, or offer specific frameworks for transforming personal observations into more accurate knowledge claims. Furthermore, its attachment to the overly abstract phrase “theoretical-mediation” actively distances itself from the more concrete “narrative account,” a phrase that is itself the more objective sounding and academically preferred term for “story,” which necessarily refers to a mediated, self-consciously crafted detailing of an (fictional or nonfictional) event.

In order to consider what types of theoretically-mediated experiential accounts contribute to more accurate social knowledge, the next section builds upon the core principles of post-positivist realist theory by bringing it into dialogue with the practice of storytelling, a long established and yet widely distrusted form of truth-telling that draws upon the experiences of daily life to assert its knowledge claims. The following section

serves to address how the under-articulated notion of what is meant by the “theoretical mediation” of experience within post-positivist realist theory contributes to a more expansive understanding of how narrative is a necessary interpretive device capable of transforming recollected events into stories that convey social meaning. By positioning experiential narrative as a form of storytelling capable of conveying objective social truths in subjective registers, I explore what types of experiential-based storytelling enable more accurate historical understanding, and how this necessitates a rethinking of the interconnectedness between subjective and objective knowledge. Through the lens of “storytelling,” and particularly the story-based methodology of testimonio, the following section addresses how social truth-value can be arrived at through narrative “untruths.”

*Transforming Experience into Social Knowledge: Narrative as Interpretive Device*

“Once a story is told it ceases to be a story: it becomes a piece of history, an interpretive device.”

~Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*

“When we theorize the intellectual value and historical role of stories, we can more self-consciously and self-critically cross disciplinary borders and reclaim stories as integral components of human thought.”

~Shari Stone-Mediatore, *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance*

How can it be that experiential narratives, as subjective interpretations of events, can produce accurate social knowledge of how power operates? While such an assertion no doubt remains a conceptual stretch for some, as a literary scholar, it seems self-evident that experience can only be conveyed through available narrative conventions, and as such, can only ever be communicated *as* story. As Strejilevich claims, “[e]very historical discourse is produced as a story, which does not diminish the true value of what is being narrated” (708). And yet, while we know that storytelling—in the forms of parable, folklore, myth, history, fiction, to name a few—have always been and continue to be utilized as a way of communicating and passing down social truths, a common

association with the term “story,” is “lie.” Whether scolding a child for “telling stories,” or attending a storytelling session where one expects to hear larger than life, fabricated tales, there is a societal perception that “story” equates to “untruth.”

As argued by Shari Stone-Mediatore in *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance*, there is a “long standing opposition between story and truth. This opposition is presupposed by both empiricists who seek to eradicate narrative from knowledge proper and by poststructuralists who deny the possibility of knowledge on the grounds of its ineluctably narrative character” (5). In short, it seems that “storytelling,” like “experience,” has earned a bad reputation. The question is if stories—like experiences—are one of the main ways we make sense of the world, how does it follow that these seeming “untruths” can prove themselves a reliable source for generating social truth-value? To echo Strejilevich’s central question: “How then, can testimony that is voiced in a language not considered trustworthy, be trusted?” (707).

In an academic atmosphere that privileges unmediated objectivity and rational thought, the subjective and interpretive registers involved in storytelling continue to marginalize this form of narrative truth-telling from knowledge “proper.” Realistically the diminished importance of stories in the academic realm does not prevent us from telling stories or understanding them for the social truths they put forth—we have always told, and will continue to tell stories in our daily lives. It does, however, limit the amount of care and attention we give to how we read and interpret stories and for what purpose. In other words, while “we continue to interpret our world in terms of stories . . . we lack

the theoretical apparatus to do so in a reflective and responsible manner” (Stone-Mediatore 4).

While Stone-Mediatore is right to call attention to the widespread suspicion over the ability of subjective, narratively-coded discourses to produce reliable social knowledge, and how this suspicion has hindered close attention to how such experiential storytelling can positively contribute to political thought, nor can we ignore the diverse platforms and contexts that increasingly recognize and depend upon witness testimony and personal narrative to arrive at historical and social truths. As Sidonie Smith’s and Julie Watson’s *Reading Autobiography* makes clear, we are in the midst of a life writing boom, and as Kay Schaffer’s and Sidonie Smith’s *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* makes more clear still, many of these life writing projects are directly taken up in the realm of social justice platforms by utilizing marginal life narratives to catalyze social change. Contemporary uses of life narrative range from the legal arenas of truth commissions, courtrooms, and human rights investigations, to multimedia populace campaigns such as “It Gets Better” and “We are the 99%,” to fictionalized autobiography and graphic memoir, such as Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*.

In the legal realm especially, there has been a marked, if gradual, shift toward recognizing the integral relationship between social stories and truth. As raised in a 1989 issue of *Michigan Law Review*, entitled “Legal Storytelling,” Kay Lane Scheppele asks, “How are people to think about the law when their stories, the ones they have lived and believed, are rejected by courts, only to be replaced by other versions with different legal results?” (2080). As she argues, this shift towards making visible the narrative

frameworks involved in legal depositions is causally related to the opening up of law schools to increasingly diverse peoples, necessarily expanding the social experiences of the “we,” many of whom come from social locations that have been systematically marginalized through legal rulings, and who have been consequently told that their experiences are “untrue” in their deviation from dominant legal paradigms.<sup>1</sup> Speaking as a lawyer, Scheppelle calls attention to the negative effects of a narrowly juridical notion of truth espoused by the courts, especially in pluralistic societies: “[i]n rethinking legal narratives, the first step is to realize that the presence of different versions of a story does not automatically mean that someone is lying and that a deviant version needs to be discredited. Stories can be told many ways, and even stories that lead to very different legal conclusions can be different plausible and accurate versions of the same event” (2097). Scheppelle’s statement is also useful for prompting us to reflect on why and how the “true/not true” binary at work in the Menchú controversy is ultimately inadequate for understanding the truth-value of her self-consciously constructed narrative account.

This shift to value life narratives in the less putatively subjective realms of legal and political arenas is one surefire sign that dominant ways of understanding storytelling are insufficient for understanding its contribution to social knowledge. And yet, despite these incremental shifts towards recognizing the central role of narrative in progressive sectors of rights-based activism and political and historical thought, a general distrust of “storytelling,” and subjective knowledge still prevails. Even in the realm of life writing where memories are explicitly worked with to fit into a narrative framework, there

remains a profound misconception that truth can only be located in the factual event and not in one's interpretation of it.

Post-positivist realist theory's claim that one's experience of an objective life event can only ever be expressed and understood as a theoretically mediated interpretation, or as a subjectively situated narration of said event, provides a productive bridge for considering how it is that storytelling contributes to social knowledge. If we can only ever arrive at objective social truths through subjective means (since knowledge seekers are necessarily socially situated beings), then it follows that stories can help us realize more accurate, less false social knowledge precisely through their self-consciously subjective perspective and narrative organization. Indeed, if as Stone-Mediatore argues, "experience is meaningful to us largely by virtue of the way it is articulated in a narrative, that is, a pattern of identifiable actors and action-units that are qualified through metaphor and other poetic devices and that are related together within a coherent structure of beginnings and endings," then we need to consider what the story-based narrative structure allows for in conveying social truths that other written forms do not (3).

This is what Stone-Mediatore means when she argues there has been inadequate attention given to the contribution of narrative to political thought (4-5). Her book, *Reading Across Borders*, is specifically committed to bringing to light the political value of marginal experience narratives. As she argues, "marginal experience narratives contribute to political thinking and political life precisely in their function as 'stories,' that is, as experience-rooted but creatively reproduced narrative texts" (6). It would seem then, that to contribute to a more democratic mode of social knowledge production we

need to take a deeper look at why and how people employ such stories to interpret social truths based on their experiential knowledge and as rooted in their daily lives. This would also suggest that even responsive academic theories, such as post-positivist realism, not simply “create” an interpretive rubric for translating experiential-based narratives into reliable social knowledge, but listen carefully to how people are *already* employing such practices through their life writing efforts.

Circling back to Strejilevich, I argue her proposal that testimony be concerned with “just truthfulness, not objectivity,” provides a key insight into how stories, like experiences, matter at all. It does not make sense that they matter in the same way as fact-based evidence, and nor does it make sense to reduce them to this. More than concrete facts, stories relay qualitative and relational perspectives on the world; they provide an in-depth, situated analysis about how it might be to live in the world within a specific social location(s). Similar to how one person’s interpretation of a life event may drastically differ from another’s, the narrative viewpoint espouses a particular worldview at the expense of others, and as such provides us with three-dimensional understanding of how the world looks from that chosen perspective:

[T]he story that a particular text presents is not given in the facts and . . . it is only one of many possible stories someone might tell of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, this narrative work is not mere artifice or distortion. When the storyteller tells the event as a story, *she draws our attention to certain relationships and qualities that are not given in the facts* but that we might find to be relevant to the phenomenon of our

world. In effect, the story invites us to consider the meanings that we find to be pressing when we view the phenomenon in light of the conceptual resources that the story offers. The story is an invitation . . . to ‘[l]ook at it this way. (Stone-Mediatore 37, my emphasis)

The truth-value of stories, like experiences, cannot be separated from their subjective character; their meaning resides precisely within it. This is what allows Kozameh to argue that changing names and details in her testimonio *Steps Under Water* no way affects the “substance” of what happened, that her account is “real” in spite of the creative license she has taken. What stories choose to highlight is intimately connected to the social interventions they seek to make, and this self-conscious partial perspective is not something to be overcome in the pursuit of knowledge; it is rather that which allows us to understand at all. As Strejilevich suggests, while the act of testimony facilitates in “the creation of knowledge” the truth-value of testimonials are more about creating avenues of “understanding” than about providing empirical information (708-9).<sup>44</sup>

If such is the case, it is pressing that we address the seeming inherent incompatibility between Strejilevich’s insistence that it is the subjective contribution of witness testimony that is of epistemic value and post-positivist realist theory’s claim that it is rather in how experiential accounts allow us “to explore the possibility of a theoretical understanding of social and cultural identity in terms of *objective* social location” (Mohanty 54, my emphasis). If the truth-value of stories is rooted in their

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<sup>44</sup> Alicia Partnoy’s *The Little School* actively plays with the slippage between empirical “knowledge” and social “understanding” through her use of “cuentimonios” (story-testimonios), in which her imaginative play with memories rooted to her time as a political prisoner in Argentina become actively juxtaposed with more baldly stated recounts of her torture and arrest.

subjective perspective, as Strejilevich suggests, does not post-positivist realist theory's "use" of narrative—as a theoretically mediated articulation of experience—only value stories as a means to an end, and hence undervalue their very contribution to knowledge production?

If post-positivist realist theory is forthcoming with its recognition of the use-value of stories to contribute to accurate social knowledge, it does not seek to dismiss its subjective dimensions in order to extract the positivist evidence it houses. Whereas subjectivity and objectivity are often positioned as conceptual opposites similar to "truth" and "lie," the post-positivist realist model challenges us to rethink this dichotomy and instead understand the terms in dialectical relation. While Strejilevich's defense of testimony's subjective quality is voiced in response to a juridical, positivist model of objectivity that equates witness testimony with "evidence" by extracting its subjective elements, post-positivist realist theory works to articulate a concept of objective knowledge that can only be reached *through* situated, subjective knowledge claims. Thus, while legal uses of testimony position Strejilevich to recognize objectivity as something a witness testimony is narrowly *reduced to*, post-positivist realist theory recognizes objectivity as something that can be *arrived at* through a critical interpretation of subjective accounts. Said differently, in the first instance, objectivity and subjectivity are pitted against each other. In the second, they are understood as mutually constitutive. Objective social knowledge therefore becomes understood as necessarily dependent on subjective knowledge claims. Regardless of what empirical information a testimony

might communicate, it is always already delivering the information in story format, and therefore meaning in excess of the objective knowledge it provides.

This recognition of the interrelation between the subjective and objective is nothing new. As Paulo Freire argues, “[o]ne cannot conceive of objectivity without subjectivity . . . nor can they be dichotomized . . . To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without people . . . World and human beings do not exist apart from each other, they exist in constant interaction” (50). The dialectical quality of subjective and objective knowledge must therefore be realized in order to understand how experiential narratives, while articulated in a subjective register, can nevertheless shed light on objective events, and to recognize how this trait is what allows stories to contribute to political thought. Indeed, it is no accident that Satya Mohanty finds the illustrative example for his mode of post-positivist realist thought through the “rememory” work of Sethe, protagonist of Toni Morrison’s sociohistorical novel, *Beloved*, and nor is it accidental that feminist activist groups and literary writers are turning towards creative narrational practices in order to “storytell” the truths of their lives.

As The Personal Narratives Group asserts, “The interpretation of women’s personal narratives . . . forces us to rethink the division between subjectivity and objectivity . . . The truths that women’s voices express are not regarded as merely subjective, that is, pertinent only to a single individual . . . It is precisely because of their subjectivity—their rootedness in time, place, and personal experience, and their

perspective-ridden character—that we value them” (263). While it is not that experiential-based stories provide an inherently better avenue for social knowledge than less subjective, historical accounts that use larger brushstrokes, their ability to reflect upon intimate details can provide a valuable addition when they are utilized to comment on objective social conditions.

Despite storytelling’s potential contribution to political thought, however, and particularly the opportunity it affords to help us rethink the interconnectedness between the subjective and objective, Stone-Mediatore reminds us that not all stories contribute to more accurate social knowledge of how power operates. Similar to Mohanty’s claim that experiential accounts are prone to error, mystifying objective social relations, and hence “lie” to us, so too can stories reiterate dominant ideologies that reinforce power inequities. But while different types of stories may serve different ideological functions, to dismiss the truth-value of all stories, especially those conveying mediated accounts of marginal experiences, is to lose out on a productive source of social understanding. As Michael Hames-García argues in relation to a post-positivist perspective of experience, “[b]y refusing to distinguish between the fictional and the ‘merely’ mediated . . . most postructuralist theorists fail to make the crucial distinction to false claims to immediate knowledge and more or less accurate (fallible), mediated descriptions of the world” (117). Which in turn raises a central question: are there types of stories that are more poised than others to contribute to a more accurate view of the world, and thus are particularly suited to intervene in the political?

To conjecture an answer, I argue it is the intentionality of a story that determines its potential contribution to political thought, and the way it conceives of the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity, truth and truth-value. For instance, while liberal autobiography and testimonio are both forms of life writing, their social function differs immensely. In liberal autobiography a common focal point is the uniqueness of the individual to overcome their social situation; in testimonio, the focus is on the social landscape that has circumscribed the life possibilities of the individual, and instead insists upon the ordinariness of the speaker. In liberal autobiography, the text first and foremost serves the purpose of self-aggrandizement in the form of entertainment; testimonio is better conceived as part of a “project of social justice in which text is an instrument” (Nance 19).

Stone-Mediatore’s cautionary reminder requires that we ask questions of the text to determine its ideological function: does it understand itself to offer a potential contribution to social knowledge in the way that Strojilovich and Kozameh suggest testimonials do, or does it understand itself as “just” a subjective story with no obligation to shed light on objective social relations? And even when a life story does recognize the political uses of the imagined, does it seek to illuminate or mystify the workings of an unjust social order? While these are larger questions that need to be explored, and that Stone-Mediatore works to address, my immediate interest for the purpose of this chapter is how marginal experience narratives *do* recognize the interrelation of the subjective and objective, truth and truth-value, and thus utilize first person narratives as a way of calling attention to, analyzing, and imagining beyond oppressive social realities.

As the next chapter articulates, politicized life writing forms such as testimonio self-consciously recognize the processes of interpretive memory work that are necessary to transform experience into an epistemic resource, which suggests we take a closer look at what types of interpretive and narrative processes they consider necessary to enable experiential-narrative's truth-telling capabilities, and for utilizing its subjective mode of delivery to arrive at more accurate, less false social truth. By articulating macrosocial critiques in microsocial affective registers, such representational practices utilize marginal experience narratives as a way of articulating political analyses through stories, replacing overly generalized theory with accessible language, applied paradigms, and grounded, example-based theory.

#### **Chapter Four: Telling Stories, Writing Praxis: Decolonizing Knowledge Production Through Feminist Storytelling Methodologies**

"I present a case for stories that use language against the grain to explore tensions in everyday life and that situate the experienced tensions within a broader social context . . . such stories challenge the discourses that naturalize social hierarchies while they open an imaginative space for us to recognize alternative identities and ways of life. In so doing, they facilitate the crossborder, multi-issue coalitions that are necessary in order for us to confront effectively the transnational organizations that increasingly govern our lives."

~Shari Stone-Mediatore, *Reading Across Borders: Storytelling and Knowledges of Resistance*

"The work of art putatively transforms the 'life' material by moving from local to general concerns. Indeed, it is this ability to transform our specific visions into something that can be shared by others, the ability to transcend narrow particularism, that makes the work revolutionary. What is held to be revolutionary about literature, then, is that it both *imagines* and *actualizes* the principle of unifying the ranks in the struggle for social change."

~Caroline S. Hau, "On Representing Others: Intellectuals, Pedagogy, and the Uses of Error"

In Moema Viezzar's "Methods of Oral Testimony," she argues that "[i]deology has 'flesh and bone': it materialises in the work and living conditions" (73). In other words, the objective reality of power relations manifests itself in the subjective, situated contexts of people's daily lives. If this is true, then it would seem that we also need a "flesh and bone" form of theorizing capable of documenting and resisting its material and

contradictory effects. Experiential-based storytelling provides one such method for delivering social critique. More specifically, I argue that the storytelling methods utilized by testimonio draw upon marginalized experience narratives to provide a situated “theoretical account of our current social and political arrangements” by providing perspective on the bottom of the social order looking up (Mohanty 54).

Indeed, even within the academy there has been the infiltration and reclamation of marginal experience narrative as a central tool of consciousness raising and ideology formation. Women of Color feminists have increasingly turned toward creative theorizing and hybrid writing forms that cut across disciplines, knowledge registers, and fiction/nonfiction divides. Feminist writers such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga have been particularly lauded for their efforts to claim hybrid forms of life writing as self-consciously resistant modes of knowledge production that can contribute to less biased social knowledge.<sup>45</sup> As Stone-Mediatore suggests, “[m]any Third World women, in particular, have found received theoretical discourses inadequate and have turned to experience-oriented writing to communicate their struggles against an array of patriarchal and neocolonialist institutions” (1). The co-edited collection of Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, utilizes “chronicles” of daily life events in order to “present a political analysis in everyday terms” (xxiv). As Brent R. Henze argues, this self-conscious interpretation of life events enables their narratively crafted experiences to serve as “‘political analyses,’ presented in the ‘everyday terms’ of regular experience” (240). As reinforced by Satya Mohanty,

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<sup>45</sup> See *Loving in the War Years, This Bridge Called My Back, Borderlands/La Frontera*

“[e]xperiences and identities—and theories about them—are bits of social and political theory themselves, and are to be evaluated as such” (71). Life writing practices that utilize testimonial accounts to comment upon and intervene in objective social relations importantly move beyond evaluating experiences as “bits of social and political theory” in order to utilize them to actively stage sociopolitical interventions.

For instance, in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* her utilization of marginal experience narrative as a form of political analysis becomes increasingly experimental in structural form. As argued by Inderpal Grewal, “Anzaldúa sees the structure of her book as a metaphor for the new consciousness she represents. The duality of form and content becomes as inseparable as bone and flesh, with the boundaries of chapters spilling into one another. The languages, voices (her mother’s, her aunt’s, her grandmother’s), genres, and disciplines (autobiography, anthropology, history) all merge” (248). These fragmented and experimental story-based framings of marginal experience narratives are not incidental. Rather, such hybridized writing forms are critical for interrupting received knowledges, reworking received representational paradigms, and for rethinking the world from the perspectives of those most exploited:

when writers . . . use their writing to explore unregistered or systematically obscured experiences of resistance to social norms, they do not just destabilize received representations of the world. In so doing, they also undermine the rationale for oppressive social institutions and facilitate broad-based resistance to those institutions. In effect, while we do not change reality merely by interpreting it differently, those stories that work with

language to indicate the muted contradictions of everyday life, the diffuse agencies of multiply oppressed people, and the values and social relationships that ruling logics efface can nonetheless intervene in the process that determine what gets recognized—and responded to—as real, significant, and possible. (Stone-Mediatore 9)

Within this logic, the narrative form becomes a crucial factor for how the social information housed within the narrative will be received. If, as Mohanty suggests, our experiences are only available to us through available and well-worn narrative tropes and plot-structures, then marginal experience narratives that play with received forms consciously mix and match styles and genres in order to re-order, and re-think what is possible. Thus, if the structure of *Borderlands* is metaphoric for the new consciousness Anzaldúa hopes to bring forth through her work, it not only reinforces the extent to which we can “rework” existing social paradigms by self-consciously breaking the rules, it also highlights how textual practices can provide one powerful way of arriving at reconceptualized understandings of social relations.

The life writing project of testimonio puts this theory into action through its story-based, theoretical mapping of the meanings of people’s daily lives within a varied sociopolitical landscape, and thus highlights how narrative can contribute to political thought. As a memory-rooted, creative life writing form, testimonio resides at the intersection of experiential-based narrative and storytelling practice, and hence at the intersection of discourses concerned with the truth-value of experience and stories. The storytelling methodologies espoused by testimonio are utilized for more than story’s

sake; they are constitutive of a form of grounded theorizing that allow its practitioners to articulate macrosocial political analyses and critiques in microsocial registers. As Strejilevich states, while “the narration of history is always already an interpretation . . . [t]his fact becomes more evident in testimonial narrative, because experience is told from an intimate perspective” (707). While the story-based approach is the *method*, testimonio is never “just” a story. Rather, testimonio is a pedagogical form of life writing that makes use of the potential of narrative to contribute to political thought. Its exemplary-based, concrete drama adds an affective dimension to social knowledge that insists upon an embodied, situational reckoning with the information it houses. By working against abstraction such narratives reinforce how these social problems are not just to be pontificated upon but affect real people, in real time, and thus require real solutions. It offers a powerful textual example of how people largely locked out of structures of power are ahead of the game in recognizing the importance of narrative to the production of more accurate historical knowledge.

As Strejilevich’s reflections on the production of her literary testimonial novel suggest, testimonio is a particularly relevant medium for feminist scholars to consider the question of experience precisely due to its democratic principle that any life can provide representational value (Beverley 34). As a forerunner to post-positivist realist theory, testimonio insists on the epistemological importance of lives lived on the borderlands and channels their unique perspectives through the skillful rhetorical tactics employed by its practitioners. In testimonio, experience is not the straight forward relay of raw, unprocessed memory (as if there ever could be such a thing), but rather carefully crafted,

mediated renditions of consummate past experiences that are in turn consciously framed to pique the interest and empathy of its readership. In other words, if the narration of an experience comprises a *translation* of a life event, then testimonio recognizes how creative *re-translations* can open up new social possibilities and bring the promise of more just futures sharply into view.

The oppositional consciousness of testimonio attests to the power of storytelling by refusing to limit the account to the facts, and to focus instead on the sublimated or unexplored effects of a social experience. As a socioliterary genre, I consider testimonio to self-consciously ride the line between what Hames-García defines as “fictional and the ‘merely’ mediated,” thus allowing it to speak social truths through its story-based methodology (117). Whereas the utilization of “storytelling” or “narrative” to deliver social critique constitutes a “method,” I understand testimonio as having its own “methodology.” While testimonio utilizes story, it is more accurately understood as enacting a story-based formula, with its own internal logic on how to make use of marginal experience narratives to comment on social relations. As suggested in the previous section, its methodology is not rigid, but most recognizable through its underlying ethos, comparable to how Freire’s methodology must be realized organically within a contextual setting.

In line with the principles of post-positivist realist theory, the interpretive, creative dimension of testimonio’s marginal experience narratives provides a critical buffer between taking an experiential account as positivist evidence (as warned against by Scott, Nance, and Spivak), and dismissing it as an unreliable untruth (as illustrated by the

Menchú's controversy). These meaning making practices, while rooted in the subjective elements of daily life, are utilized in order to mean beyond themselves, to reflect on objective social relations, and thus to resonate beyond their immediate narrated circumstance. By providing uncanny perspective and analysis of the facts of its practitioner's daily lives, testimonio utilizes its particular brand of narrative analysis to arrive at a more complex historical understanding of the events themselves.

In "My Experience in the Theatre Collective Sistren," Honor Ford-Smith describes the collective's experiential-based storytelling methodology as staking a claim in "what it means to deal with the world as creative individuals, rather than as victims or objects" (49). Articulated in more frank terms: "[o]ur business is story telling. We tell stories over and over again about our grievances in order to expose abuses and to challenge the existing situation" (25). As such, storytelling is Sistren's preferred mode of delivery for voicing social critique and in imagining more just, alternative paradigms for being in the world. Their stories provide the collective a useful framework within which to situate and articulate their social critique and political analyses. There is cultural and historical precedence for this as well. As argued in their collection of life stories, "*Lionheart Gal* draws on a legacy of tale-telling which has always preserved the history of Caribbean women . . . [t]hese tales encode what is overtly threatening to the powerful into covert images of resistance so that they can live on in times when overt struggles are impossible or build courage in moments when it is" (Sistren xv). As defined by Sistren, to "storytell" is to recognize storytelling as a resistant mode of praxis capable of communicating social truths that either other writing forms are incapable of conveying,

or convey in registers in which it is not safe to do so.

It is thus the inherent *creativity* of testimonio's storytelling methodologies that lends itself to representing nuanced depictions of marginalized experiences and realities, and for articulating social knowledge that is useful for rethinking power dynamics in everyday life. As a socioliterary mode of life writing, testimonio is unrestricted by rigid journalistic expectations, which allows for the imaginative element that provides the power to think beyond, to see differently. While the subjective mode of address is used as a method for commenting on objective social reality in a nuanced way, testimonio affords a creative license in shaping narrative accounts, and hence, actively works with memory in order to stage political interventions. As Strejilevich reminds us, "testimony is not only a means of working through, but also a means for social and cultural resistance, which is necessary for the ethical recovery of a community" (707). As embodied in the very narrational framework of testimonio itself—whether through an "I" that represents a "we," or alternately a "we" that represents a more expansive understanding of who constitutes the "we"—resistant storytelling practices balance the personal and communal by looking inward to reckon with one's own social location in order to in turn effect outward social change. Beyond an immediate personal use of experience, marginal experience storytelling methods interpret experience to contribute to the creation of more accurate historical knowledge, and hence utilize the personal for impersonal ends.

Although engaged under the rubric of "autobiography" rather than testimonio, the ideological power of resistant life storytelling is similarly articulated in Carolyn Kay

Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives*, where she interweaves autobiographical elements of her own life and that of her mother's in order to shed light on working-class lives in South London in the 1950s. Steedman's text explicitly works to identify the types of interpretive processes that are necessary to draw upon experiences in order to counter dominant accounts of history. Steedman's text is therefore self-consciously about "interpretations, about the places where we rework what has already happened to give current events meaning" (5). As she suggests, the life stories her mother told her constituted "a form of political analysis, that allows a political interpretation to be made of her life" (6). Steedman thus reinforces the potential of drawing upon one's own memory archive in order to encode a form of social analysis out of our particular social situations. As she suggests, her book is particularly "about lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretive devices of a culture don't quite work" (5). Similar to Sistren's determination to combat oppressive social realities as creative individuals, Steedman's narrative confronts the "refusal of a complicated psychology to those living in conditions of material distress" (12).

Recounting the disillusionment she personally experienced when reading accounts of "working-class lives" that did not reflect her own reality, Steedman recalls coming to a point where she decided, "If no one will write my story, then I shall have to go out and write it myself" (23). It is not just Steedman's own story that she presents, but also that of her mother's: "the evidence presented here is of a different order from the biographical; it is about the experience of my own childhood, and the way in which my mother re-asserted, reversed and restructured her own within mine" (8). As such, it is a

relational interpretation that Steedman provides, since the meaning of her childhood cannot be separated from its intimate, if vexed, relationship with her mother. As the title suggests, and similar to testimonio, her account is most interested in understanding her position within her existing social landscape, and more generally how one's social landscape affects what stories we tell, and what we see.

Steedman's central preoccupation with interpretation—her insistence that one's past experiences only matter in how we interpret them—further develops the idea of story-based narration as a critical tool for working with personal memory to comment on objective social conditions. Echoing Strojilevich and post-positivist realist theory, she argues that it is never just a life event, but rather the way in which we remember and make use of the event that provides its potential contribution to social knowledge:

It is about the stories we make for ourselves, and the social specificity of our understanding of these stories . . . We all return to memories and dreams like this, again and again; the story we tell of our own life is reshaped around them. But the point doesn't lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time at which they happened; the only point lies in interpretation. The past is re-used through the agency of social information, and that interpretation of it can only be made with what people know of a social world and their place within it. (5)

Connecting back to discourses of situated knowledge and the always already theoretically mediated understanding of life events as articulated by post-positivist reality theory,

Steedman insists the truth-value of experience lies in what we do with it: how we use it to create meaning, and what type of meaning we seek to create.

And yet Steedman goes farther than the work of post-positivist realist theory and Strejilevich in her detailed claim to memory work as an important tool for counteracting the limiting social narratives imposed on those living on the margins of society. Her central interest is in exploring the pragmatic and tactical side of memory work, in which she provides insight into the type of analytical processes needed to transform personal experiences into more reliable forms of social knowledge:

To begin to construct history, the writer has to do two things, make two movements through time. First of all, we need to search backwards from the vantage point of the present in order to appraise things in the past and attribute meaning to them. When events and entities in the past have been given their meaning in this way, then we can trace forward what we have already traced backwards, and make a history. When history is finally written, events are explained by putting them in causal order and establishing causal connections between them. (21)

Steedman's emphasis on the primary importance of identifying causal relationships is a central claim of post-positivist realist theory, which argues that it is by locating these causal relations that subjective claims begin to be transformed into more objective social knowledge. As Steedman argues, the only way to arrive at an analysis of these relations is by combing backwards and forwards through time as a way of creating emotional distance from the original memory, broadening our scope to explore the social landscape

that informed a particular event, and to realize how other more recent contexts and experiences continue to inform our current understanding of said event.

Steedman's suggestion sheds light on how we enable a use of the personal for an impersonal effect and can prevent strictly reactive, nostalgic, and emotive-based accounts of an earlier memory. This "widened lens" to consider the meaning of our experiences is not an attempt to counteract the affective quality of memory; it is precisely the emotive power of stories that allow them to go beyond generalizing theories and to provide a level of understanding that knowledge proper cannot. Rather, this broadened perspective helps us to articulate an analysis of how even our emotions are socially constructed in response to our social location and thus not entirely our own. As Satya Mohanty suggests, "[e]motions fall somewhere between conscious reasoning and reflex-like instinctual responses to stimuli. They are . . . ways of paying attention to the world" (49). Emotions, like experience, cannot be taken at face value; their contribution to knowledge lies in understanding what social circumstances have worked to create such emotive effects.

By working with memory, by broadening our lens as a result of combing through past and present perspectives, Steedman and post-positivist realist theory argue we have the potential to bring into focus aspects of the event that previously went unnoticed or were only fleetingly acknowledged in the periphery of our memory bank. By working with these peripheral elements that we shed new light on stories, memories, events, and worldviews that we thought we knew, and that in turn open us up to the possibility of knowing differently. It is therefore no coincidence that experiential-based stories of

marginalized social actors are also a valuable resource for social knowledge that enable us to move beyond textbook accounts and glean more of the complexities and contradictions of power relations that accompany the conditions of daily life lived out on the social margins. As Steedman frames it, this interpretive, story-based approach is responsive to the social need to gain a “sense of people’s complexity of relationship to the historical situations they inherit” (19).

But if all life writing is a performance of one kind or another, a purposeful construction of loosely remembered and interpreted pieces of one’s past to convey meaning through a particular narrative framework and cognitive interpretation, it is the careful attention that testimonio gives to how experience matters that determines its contribution to social knowledge. As Strejilevich states in relation to the multiple interviews she conducted to complete her literary testimonio *Una Sola Muerte Numerosa/A Single Numberless Death*, “I needed to hear other stories coming from the same place in order to complete my own” (711). While Strejilevich’s pursuit for understanding was initiated for personal means, her decision to conduct interviews with others signals her attempt to gain a widened perspective, and hence to understand the situation more objectively, even as this broadened understanding could only come from others’ subjective accounts. Indeed, it is no coincidence that Strejilevich’s literary testimonio is written in part as a corrective to *Nunca Más*, the nationally commissioned testimony-based, yet deposition-oriented, report on the human rights abuses that occurred during the Argentinean Dirty War. As Strejilevich argues, “A literary approach to

testimony allows for a distancing in relation to the intimate memories . . . [r]ather than knowledge, the witness/writer searches for understanding” (Strejilevich 710).

By operating on a microsocial register, the story-based methodology espoused by testimonio attests to how stories accrue meaning in the details that are too minute and contextual for macrosocial histories and theories to register. While the knowledge articulated by testimonio is less empirical, its strength is its ability to make conceptual linkages between seemingly disconnected sites and discourses. As Strejilevich argues, the “witness attempts to create bridges between ‘here’ and there’ through the narration of *what might not be told as a theory but as an insight*. It is for this reason that a poetic voice might be needed to tell the story” (704, my emphasis).<sup>46</sup> The stories conveyed in testimonio might not connect all of the dots; they might not produce airtight theory with a capital “T.” But the dots they do connect are meaningful and purposeful, more deserving of being understood as a fragmented, grounded form of theory than as Strejilevich’s understated suggestion of “insight.” As Aurora Levins Morales powerfully articulates in *Telling to Live*, testimonio is the process of “making theory out of the stuff in our pockets, out of the stories, incidents, dreams, frustrations that were never acceptable anywhere else” (32). The exemplary, story-based framing of testimonio reinforces how creative writing can think past and through imposed disciplinary and social limits.

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<sup>46</sup> Strejilevich’s language here resonates with the differences Sandra Harding establishes between a “claim” or “perspective,” and a more fully developed, theoretically reliable “standpoint.” Nevertheless, I argue that in the collaborative activist testimonios I engage with in Section Three, in so far as the “raw material” of experience is engaged with and worked through within the group, and in turn translated into a dialogic, polyvocal framework, while individual accounts might put forward “claims,” the collective interpretation constitutes a standpoint, with all of the necessary contradictions and ambiguities associated with socially diverse women organizing around social issues they all remain committed to.

It is testimonio's situated, embodied form of social knowledge that provides its force, and which closely resounds with Sandra Harding's notion of "strong objectivity" growing out of collective marginalized knowledge claims. True understanding cannot be derived through mere cerebral exercise, but rather through a reckoning with the messy details of daily life and the conflicts that emerge between heart and head. The experiential, example-based quality of testimony marks its contextual, situated, "concrete" drama an exceptional contribution to social knowledge, one that prides itself on a felt, cognitive understanding of an event rather than mere reduction of its meaning to facts and figures. As Strejilevich argues, "[w]hen witnessing an event, one does not learn through abstract rational theory: testimony can provide knowledge mainly by means of the exemplary . . . Through the example one . . . comes to knowledge in the manner of the witness, not through the abstractions of reason but through an empirical encounter . . . a concrete drama" (705). Through its intimate mode of address, by taking observations down to the concrete, contradictory, and complex level of lived experience, testimonios encourage readers to reason with more than their intellect; they allow a means of affective connection through an ability to position readers to see through the eyes of others who reside in different cultural and material worlds.

The process of decoding, as demanded by story-framed analysis, demands moving from the realm of the abstract to the concrete (Freire 105). As qualified by The Personal Narratives Group, the truths articulated in marginal experience narratives "are essential because they are specific; they are not abstract generalizations about life" (262). Testimonio's exemplary-based method allows political analysis to be formed out of the

meaningful, yet nuanced details that more quantitative attempts at knowledge production overlook. And yet, there remains a fundamental aspect of storytelling and experience narratives that I have heretofore overlooked: their intersubjective mode of address. Since narration is a dialogic mode of communication, the only point of telling is to communicate it *to* someone. Life writing accounts therefore reinforce their own theoretical-mediation insofar as they call attention to how “experience always has [a] divided, duplicitous character: it has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced” (Mohanty 43). Echoes Strejilevich, the “actual experience only happens belatedly, as a ‘performative speech act,’ through the process of telling the story to another, a listener” (708). This dialogic, situational quality reinforces how experiences, like identities, are always context bound and relational, and that it is through the telling of the event that the meaning of an experiential account is produced.

This, I think, calls attention to a key insight on the differing uses of marginal experience narrative, and in particular, its role in testimonio. As I have suggested, we engage in storytelling practices in the course of daily life. The stories we tell that are rooted in the “stuff” of our daily existence can be called upon to do many things: to teach a child a lesson, to make someone laugh, to work something out for our own understanding. And yet, even as these accounts are used to “figure out,” or decode, a particular social situation—and may in fact reflect our developing critical consciousness—such narrative acts remain primarily concerned with our immediate social situation. Their pedagogical and analytical insight is therefore limited in that they never transcend the realm of the personal.

There are also those experiential stories that we may use self-consciously to communicate a point to a chosen “community of meaning” (Macdonald and Sánchez-Casal 3). A particular instance of this is when feminist pedagogues draw upon personal experience in the classroom to reinforce a conceptual point. While such efforts do transgress the personal by actively working to bridge the subjective and objective, and thus may contribute to less false social knowledge, they do not *as of yet* contribute to a more objective understanding of social relations, in that they are not fully historicized. Though these efforts mark an important part of the process in coming to critical consciousness, at this stage they still constitute more of a “claim” or “perspective” than an objective “standpoint.”

In other words, while coming to critical consciousness is a step toward a more objective understanding of our social situation, unless acted upon, it still serves our own purposes in that it remains focused on the quest for self, rather than collective, knowledge. Knowledge as a historical enterprise, however, is a communal exercise, and thus utilizes the revelations of critical consciousness to help realize social change. Testimonio can therefore be understood as one way of drawing upon subjective knowledge and working with experience in order to contribute to more historically accurate social knowledge. As an explicitly pedagogical marginal experience narrative, testimonio performs its practitioners’ processes of coming to consciousness to at once provide social commentary on their social situation and to guide its readers to similarly adapt a critical lens in their daily lives. In both functions, it utilizes the personal for impersonal ends; to mean beyond the immediate circumstances it writes from. In this

way, testimonio reinforces for its readers and practitioners that “objective knowledge is not a product of disinterested inquiry but a form of social practice . . . [a]s social practice, knowledge is necessarily political. Objectivity is ‘something we struggle for’” (Hau 161).

The feminist polyvocal strand of testimonio reiterates the notion that objectivity is something we struggle for by insisting upon a dialogic framework in which different knowledge claims and experiential accounts are positioned alongside one another within the narrative frame. While each narrator puts forth their own social truths, the polyvocal framework demands that its readers and practitioners work through the individual, subjective truth claims of each author in order to come to a more accurate understanding of the power relations that govern the social world they narrate. It is this dialogic, polyphonic quality that I turn attention to in the next chapter.

### **Chapter Five: Dialogic Possibilities: Stories in Conversation: Negotiating Social Difference Through Co-Narrational Practice**

“In order to understand the meaning of dialogical practice, we have to put aside the simplistic understanding of dialogue as a mere technique . . . On the contrary, dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship . . . I engage in dialogue not necessarily because I like the other person. I engage in dialogue because I recognize the social and not merely the individualistic character of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as an indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing.” ~Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo, “A Dialogue: Culture, Language, and Race”

It is no accident that dialogue remains a staple of consciousness-raising efforts. From Paulo Freire, to social organizers, to classroom projects committed to social justice struggles, to the collaborative feminist activist testimonios I discuss at length in Section Three, the dialogical relation of listening and telling, asking and answering, is understood as a significant piece for developing social knowledge claims into more epistemically whole knowledge. By working with people from other social locations we are prompted

to see our way around issues from a multiplicity of perspectives, in turn leading us to better understand the situatedness of our own perspective on an event or social issue, how this can communicate important information on our own social location, and more broadly, our world. It is no surprise then that this commitment to dialogic exchange is a central component of feminist polyvocal testimonios. Whether realized through situated exchanges between members of a collective, conducting interviews with others who have experienced similar social circumstances, placing different narrative voices alongside each other within the narrative frame, or in their intersubjective engagement with a reading audience, dialogue remains a central way in which these works utilize subjective knowledge claims to comment on objective social situations.

Indeed, if it is true that “dialogic praxis is pushed to the margins” in mainstream academia (Nagar and Swarr 8), then it is also true that feminist polyvocal testimonios self-consciously position the dialogic processes that have enabled them to produce social knowledge front and center within the narrative frame. To reference the influential methodology of Margaret Randall, dialogue is not just about the act of telling; it is just as much about listening, and particularly listening to those who have been historically silenced: “As women reevaluating our present we began to realize we have a past . . . We began to understand that our collective as well as our individual memories have been invaded, raped, erased . . . Listening—to ourselves as well as to our grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and to women of different histories, ethnicities, social class, and cultures—has been important in the context of this changed vision” (60). Adds *griyo* and former Haitian Minister of the Status and Rights of Women, Lise-Marie Dejean, “[i]f you

want decentralized power, you must be by sitting with people and listening to them” (160).

If the epistemic importance of experience is not in its claims to unmediated, or “pure” forms of consciousness, or as “evidence,” but rather in its ability to bridge structural flows of economic and social power with the ways in which these forces play themselves out in the crevices of daily life, then I contend that feminist polyvocal testimonio’s ability to bring differently, but not quite disparate, voices into conversation offers an important way to think through how narrative form also significantly determines how experience matters in knowledge production. In considering Steedman’s point on how normative narrative frameworks do not allow for the type of memory work necessary to produce accurate social knowledge given their “temporal revelation: they move forward in time in order to demonstrate a state of affairs” (2), hybrid writing styles, such as polyvocal testimonios, do more than simply “add” perspective. Their collage-like, fragmented narratives allow room for the backwards and forwards processing of interpersonal memories involved in producing a historical account, and show the “bits and pieces from which it is made up” (Steedman 21). Through this narrative framework multiple truth claims emerge—claims that often contradict each other—and yet it is through this multiplicity that we are able to hear important linkages and continuities between sets of experiences, and which collectively realize a cautious standpoint.

As The Personal Narratives Group argues in *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, “[i]n the face of women’s life stories, the search for Truth requires truths” (263). By undercutting the notion that any single

narrated experience can provide an objective, unmediated, version of “Truth,” polyvocal testimonios embody a theory of partial perspective, insisting that while our lived subject position necessarily informs what and how we know, our experiential knowledge must be brought into dialogue with others in order for it to mean beyond ourselves. By interlinking individual women’s life stories, and positioning these truths alongside each other in the narrative frame, polyvocal feminist testimonios structurally allow for a larger, collective “Truth” to cautiously emerge, and thus conceptually and narratively realize the significance of this sentiment.

In other words, polyvocal feminist testimonios recognize that in order to transform an experience from a claim into a potential source of social knowledge, beyond our own individual memory work, and beyond merely bringing it before others, it must enter into sustained dialogue with those who are poised to listen to our experience and to in turn question its meaning and our perspective of it from their own situated perspective and knowledge-base for the shared commitment of producing more accurate social knowledge. It is through this process of self-conscious dialogic interaction that a claim is put forth into the world to be worked on and turned into a more objective depiction of itself. Strejilevich gives this claim validity and application in describing her motivation for conducting interviews of others’ experiences of the Dirty War while completing the manuscript of *Una Sola Muerte Numerosa/A Single Numberless Death*. A careful reading of the following passage uncovers much more than a synopsis of the events leading up to the book’s writing. It provides an example-based theory of the relevance of

polyvocal frameworks for the production of counternarratives and their potential contribution to providing a more accurate view of historical events. As she reflects,

I needed to hear other stories coming from the same place in order to complete my own. This is why, after narrating my own story in a poetic voice, I went back to Argentina in the nineties determined to hear and record other voices—former prisoners, former disappeared, families of the disappeared, activists, friends of my brother and cousins who are still missing, and people who just happened to live there at that particular time . . . . All of these unfinished stories became a choir that opened the key to my own despair. My search for meaning had been painful but successful. I was not looking for conclusions, but to decipher my own echoes. We all wanted to understand how that inferno could have survived for so long, comfortably erected in the midst of our city, annihilating our social and personal projects, our world. Through telling, we were all able to finally figure the experience we had gone through. (711)

While Strejilevich began her narrative interpretation with her own voice—with what she knew or thought she knew of her experience—this passage conveys how she came to realize that her own experience needed to be supplemented by other voices to fill in the gaps of her knowledge and the memories that lay beyond the grasp of her understanding in order to produce a more accurate historical account of her experience. Through this process, she comes to realize that her political imprisonment during the Dirty War cannot be fully understood without placing it in dialogue with the accounts of

others from the “same place.” Although this phrase is initially left unqualified, she later clarifies her conceptual understanding of those who inhabit the “same place”: “former prisoners, former disappeared, families of the disappeared, activists, friends of my brother and cousins who are still missing, and people *who just happened to live there at that particular time*” (my emphasis). Through this qualification Strejilevich highlights how wide ranging groups of people can become arbitrarily entangled in webs of meaning making through historical circumstance; there is nothing assumed or pre-given in this assemblage of interviewees. While there are no doubt vast ideological, social, and material differences between them, within this context, they are each other’s “own people.”<sup>47</sup>

The temporal dimension of Strejilevich’s journey is also highly significant, since her choice to conduct interviews several years after the Dirty War has given her plenty of time and space to reflect upon her account of the events. Nor is it a coincidence that as a writer, Strejilevich notes how she moved to the interview format only after narrating her story in a “poetic voice.” This literary beginning is marked within the testimonio by her heavy use of figurative language that privileges affective understanding and sensory discovery over facts, events, and even plot structure, within its completed form. Beginning with her own interpretation of the events Strejilevich resists sublimating her perspective, and positions her to test her interpretive “hunches” off the sounding board of

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<sup>47</sup> This is a reference to Michael Hames-García’s, “Who Are Our Own People?” in which he considers how thinking beyond our immediate social locations counters “restriction with expansion” (126), and which forces us to rethink a limiting understanding of who “our people” are. Strejilevich’s inclusion of activists as perspectives coming from “the same place” provides a telling example of how one’s “own people” need not be rigidly determined by social location, and can be alternately connected through self-consciously assumed political and ideological positionalities when responsibly acted upon.

her chosen others without losing sight of her own truth. It is only after an initial, yet thorough, working through of her experiences that she undertakes interviews with others to collect more factual information. In other words, it is only after her extended personal reflections that she finds herself needing a community of interpreters in order to validate her knowledge claims.

Strejilevich suggests that her previously undecipherable emotions become named through the dialogic interaction of the interview process. Hearing accounts of those personally affected by similar events allows her to put her guard down, and she willingly becomes part of a community of knowers that do not separate historical fact from the emotional disruptions that accompany such telling. This affective dimension allows her to move on to her next step of comprehension, to access emotions that she previously could not—those that did not seem safe to acknowledge—and that give way to painful, yet necessary, release. And yet it simultaneously attests to Strejilevich’s prioritized shift from subjective towards more objective forms of understanding, which reinforces post-positivist realist theory’s assertion that objectivity can only be achieved through a multiplicity of processed subjective experiences. While each individual account is “unfinished” on its own, when placed in resonance with others, a multi-voiced “choir” emerges that helps each individual narrative to become a more complete story.

The material and visual dimensions of Strejilevich’s description of the “inferno” also strongly resonate with Toni Morrison’s concept of “rememory”:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay . . . Place, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—

stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world . . . Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. (*Beloved* 35-36)

Similar to how Strejilevich seeks out a community of knowers who were equally impacted by the Dirty War in order to better understand her situation, so does *Beloved's* protagonist, Sethe, need to work through the traumatic memories of her enslavement and humiliation with other formerly enslaved survivors of “Sweet Home,” in order to lessen the past’s hold on her. By working with an interpretive community to revisit the past in order to garner more of a historically accurate perspective on it, both the fictional Sethe and living Strejilevich gain a fuller perspective that contributes to their mean-making processes and leads them to refuse to succumb to their traumatic past, even as they can never escape it. Like Sethe’s images of the forgotten farm or the burned down house, Strejilevich’s “inferno” attests to how these places psychologically remain intact. And yet, as Sethe discovers through her relationship with Paul D, and as Strejilevich experiences through the process of telling, the very act of reliving and sharing these memories with others within one’s chosen interpretive community is a refusal to let the terror take hold. Surviving and living become acts of defiance, and collective meaning making becomes a way to “finally figure the experience.”

In other words, Strejilevich was not looking for readymade, one-dimensional “answers” from those whom she conducted interviews with. Rather, she was looking to engage with others who had parallel experiences in order to come to a sense of resolve that could only occur through an *opening up* of her private interpretations to see how they

converged and diverged with others. By entering into this interpretive community Strejilevich shapes her “inklings” and “hunches” into knowledge claims, working those vague but gnawing feelings that she “knew” but could not quite articulate into sites of social knowledge. By integrating her personal memories and interpretations with those of others, she locates stories that reciprocate, validate, and “decipher her own echoes,” an act that provides order and semblance to her recollections and that boast a fuller interpretive meaning of her political imprisonment. It is through dialogue that she arrives at a more accurate analysis of how her own personal experience elucidates the Dirty War as historical event.

While Strejilevich’s discussion is particular to the interview process that led to the writing of her literary testimonio, it more broadly serves as a telling account of the function of polyvocality in feminist testimonio, why one would seek out others to better tell one’s own story, and more theoretically, how entering into dialogue with an interpretive community from similar social locations and positionalities<sup>48</sup> can provide a crucial step for transforming personal experience into relatable and reliable knowledge of social relations. Such interpretive communities are what Susan Sánchez-Casal and Amie A. MacDonald refer to as “communities of meaning,” forged through the intersection of “social location, cultural identity, epistemic standpoint, and political convictions” (11).

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<sup>48</sup> In Rosaura Sánchez’s “On a Critical Realist Theory of Identity,” she differentiates between the term “social position” and “positionality,” to good effect. While Sánchez argues that social position refers to “one’s social location within a given social reality” along the lines of Paula Moya’s concept of imposed, ascriptive identity markers, she uses “positionality” to reference “one’s imagined relation or standpoint relative to that positioning” (38). It is therefore one’s self-reflexivity of their social location that differentiates position from positionality. Social positioning and positionality are necessarily interconnected, and yet there may be a purposeful “out of sync-ness” between them that affects how one lives in the world. As Sánchez argues, “[p]ositionality is a useful diagnostic construct as it enables one to better examine and understand why individuals sharing a similar or even the same positioning do not *live* their situation in the same way” (38).

As such, communities of meaning are also “communities of knowing,” or “places where people discover some commonality of experience through which they struggle for objective knowledge” (11).

If Strejilevich’s reflections highlight how the dialogic interactions of the interview process led her to discover an invaluable interpretive community, her account bespeaks one of the many varied dialogic methods through which feminist practitioners produce polyvocal testimonios. For instance, while *Lionheart Gal*, *Walking on Fire*, and *Playing With Fire* are the products of feminist collectives, or self-consciously formed “communities of knowing,” Beverly Bell’s *Walking on Fire* and Margaret Randall’s oral history accounts fabricate this dialogic interaction by yoking together different perspectives of women who occupy similar social situations within a fragmented narrative frame, thus formulating a “community of meaning” through the juxtaposition of narrative voices. Or, as in the case with the diverse storytelling methods employed by Edwidge Danticat, practitioners might also utilize archival accounts, expound upon intergenerational family histories, or seek out collaborators to reflect on a sanctioned social topic, as illustrated by Danticat’s edited collection of essays, *The Butterfly’s Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora in the United States*.

While in some polyvocal testimonios this dialogic interaction is “imagined” in the sense that it is one writer or editor establishing a polyphonic frame out of collected interviews or a world of fictional characters, in activist polyvocal feminist collaborations, this dialogic quality reflects the group dynamics that inform the text. In both instances, however, diversity of narrative perspective is highlighted as a resource that contributes to

more epistemic wholeness, especially when engaged in a dialogic fashion. As such, regardless of how they are configured, all polyvocal feminist testimonios deeply reflect Paulo Freire's insistence that dialogue not be understood as mere conversation for conversation's sake (understood as polite, uncritical discourse), but rather a focused engagement with one another's ideas and truth claims in order to arrive at a more objective and better understanding of the topic at hand. By working through and across social differences—and by starting with those differences that have been most materially and ideologically marginalized—these texts reinforce post-positivist realist theory's claim that such exchange can contribute to less false, more accurate social knowledge through the situational and relational interplay of experience narratives committed to demystifying social relations.

For instance, as Ford-Smith recounts in an afterword to *Lionheart Gal* penned in 2005, “This commitment to dialogue and to small-scale coalition and collaboration across what is now called difference was the ethical centerpiece of the early work of Sistren, and of this collection . . . It would not have been possible without a commitment to this process over a protracted period of time” (296). A similar political conviction is articulated by the Latina Feminist Group who argue that “[t]o write and theorize about a range of Latina experiences . . . required being in sustained dialogue with one another” (9). The importance of sustained intra-group dialogue is reiterated by *Telling to Live*'s assertion that “sharing can begin a process of empowerment” (1). As the subjective knowledge claims put forth by individuals become collectively worked through they enable a process of creating more objective knowledge.

These passages reflect central principles of both Freirean dialogic methodology and post-positivist realist theory, especially in how a group's collective goal of more epistemically whole knowledge cannot exist without individual input and reflection. As Brent R. Henze argues, agency itself is a dialectical process: "far from conflicting with the formation of a true collectivity, individual agency facilitates the process; and the resultant collective has greater potential for liberatory political transformation" (237). Polyvocal feminist testimonios reinforce this sentiment insofar as the collections could not exist without individual accounts and reflections, and yet, the individual accounts only become epistemologically meaningful through the work of group interpretation. The effect is more "multiple subjectivity" than seamless collectivity: "[i]n being specific but also heterogeneous, it is a complex subjectivity that is multiple and varied but with shared overlappings" (Grewal 240).

This commitment to dialogic process is also found within individual narrative accounts. As Claudette Phene suggests in *Walking on Fire's* "A Little Light": "When you get into an organization, you change completely. What makes you change? I come to see you, know you, share ideas. That allows a change in both of us" (115). In "Veteran by Veteran," the narrator recounts the pedagogical function of sharing experience in a group setting: "Me haffi tek me own time and find nobody force notten pon me. Di only way me could a get exposure is by mixing meself wid odder people. Me gather experience from dem, den me go one side and tink bout plenty tings dat puzzle me" (*Lionheart Gal* 157). Here, dialogue is configured as a necessary component in the democratic production of social knowledge, and hence a valuable alternative to the top-

down and rote memorization tactics the narrator encountered in a school setting. By working through her own experiential knowledge base and putting it into dialogue with others, the narrator highlights how she seeks out others' social truths and formulates her own conclusions by situating her truth in relation to them.

This continued inward, outward movement between individual reflection and group discussion, and moving through and across individual accounts, parallels Freire's insistence that praxis can only be constituted through the fluid motion of action and reflection, that each is meaningless without the other. As Henze argues in relation to the figure of "Alice," a member of a feminist consciousness-raising group, "Alice's life adds to [its] collective pool of resources. The group framework becomes more effective as it is tested on an increasing range of experiences, leading it to become better able to help Alice interpret her experiences; she understands better, she has more to offer back to the group, and so the cycle continues" (245).<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, the "piecing together" of different perspectives and viewpoints through the juxtaposition of experiential stories also works to move from the articulation of knowledge "claims" to a more worked through, fought for social "standpoint." It is through a collection of several women's claims, and a systemic analytical processing of them in relation to their varied contexts and social locations, that a standpoint begins to materialize. The polyvocal frameworks of feminist testimonio, and the contradictions and complexities that accompany such a representational practice, therefore reinforce how a standpoint can only begin to

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<sup>49</sup> The figure of Alice is originally taken up by Satya Mohanty in "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On Beloved and the Postcolonial Condition," and is in reference to a particular member of a feminist consciousness raising group as discussed in Naomi Scheman's "Anger and the Politics of Naming." It has since become a paradigmatic example/reference point in post-positivist realist theory.

materialize through sustained attempts to work through the contradictions and complexities that arise from the social differences present in interpretive communities.

The polyvocal frameworks of feminist testimonios therefore provide a “theory in the flesh” account of post-positivist realist theory’s assertion of the need to work through social difference for the purpose of better understanding ourselves and each other, and in order for epistemic wholeness to materialize. Such interbraidings of experience encourage practitioners to recognize the partiality of their own knowledge claims. This continued mode of reflexivity requires that participants take seriously the knowledge claims produced by others, and to make room for these “competing” worldviews in their intellectual and emotional processing. As a human process, this dialogic approach is certainly prone to error. As Freire argues, “dialogue cannot exist without humility . . . How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own? . . . How can I dialogue if I am closed to—and even offended by—the contribution of others?” (89). Nevertheless, through a sustained outward-inward movement, such collective meaning making allows individuals to do the personal work of de-centering their own worldview as it simultaneously solidifies for them how their worldview has been shaped by their sociopolitical positionings. While the process has no guarantees, it does enable the possibility of participants coming to consciousness through recognizing the systemic relations that define their “limit situations” and working with others to change them (Freire 99).

The process of working through multiple situated “truths” to arrive at a better historical understanding of “Truth,” of engaging with chosen “communities of meaning,”

also resonates with Wendy Brown's claim that the possibility of progressive identity politics is enabled by moving from the concept of "being" to "wanting" (407). Rather than recognizing identities *as* things, polyvocal testimonios allow us to re-conceptualize social location as manifested in contextual relationships *between* people (Hames-García 110). Such a political posturing rejects fixed, rigid identity categories—without discounting asymmetrical power relations based on social location—in favor of coalitional platforms premised on shared political/intellectual goals. Indeed, if Joan Scott's warning of experiential accounts is motivated by the neglect of historians to "piece together" different experiences that would enable us to understand how different articulations refer back to differing social positionings within "the same economy" (779), then the insistence of polyvocal feminist testimonios, as realized versions of post-positivist realist theory, of weaving together individual experiences for the purpose of "epistemic wholeness," importantly acknowledges the centrality of Scott's concern while simultaneously building on it to consider how to make tangible that different experiential knowledge claims do, in fact, represent fragments of the "same economy."

As an embodied version of post-positivist realist theory, polyvocal feminist testimonio "entails a theory of how group interests can expand" (Hames-García 127). By utilizing personal experience for impersonal ends, polyvocal feminist testimonios pave the way for progressive coalitional politics in their recognition of history as a collective, rather than individual, enterprise. Still, such alliance building "must be grounded in imaginative, but not imaginary, forms of identification" (Henze 246). Rather than considering women to share certain perspectives and life experiences, polyvocal

testimonios create a dialogic interplay so that the differences are not only allowed to present themselves, but to prove themselves as vital resources in working towards a collectively defined goal. In so doing, these works enable a transnational feminist politics of location, a coalitional exercise that Caren Kaplan defines as “a practice of affiliation . . . [that] identifies the grounds for historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities, and possibilities for alliances” (139). By espousing a politics more akin to “wanting” than “being,” polyvocal feminist testimonios consider how and in what form certain marginal experience narratives will help them to get there, and mobilize a dialogics of experiential tale-telling to truth-tell social realities in story-based form. As I explore at length in Section Three, this is why activist collaborations give extensive consideration to the issues the group meets around, and why.

*Countering Restriction with Expansion: The Truth Lies in (Reader) Interpretation*

“All autobiographic memory is true. It is up to the interpreter to discover in which sense, where, for which purpose.”

~Luisa Passerini, *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*

“When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don’t reveal the past ‘as it actually was,’ aspiring us to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences . . . We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them.”

~The Personal Narratives Group, *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*

As Smith and Watson suggest in *Reading Autobiography*, life writing projects cannot be judged within a juridical notion of truth, and nor should they aspire to be. Rather, as “an intersubjective [interpretive] process that occurs within a dialogic exchange between writer and reader/viewer rather than as a story to be proved or falsified, the emphasis of reading shifts from assessing and verifying knowledge to

observing processes of communicative exchange and understanding” (17). In polyvocal feminist testimonio this is not only due to multi-voiced frameworks that house different stories within the narrative frame, but also because these accounts tell different stories depending on the positionality of the reader. The “truth” that emerges is located between the expressed narrative and the interpretation readers take from it, enabling the possibility of expanding a reader’s sense of “one’s own people” through the pedagogical intent of the testimonio project (Hames-García 127). By embodying core principles of post-positivist realist theory, and in addition to modeling coalitional alliances through collective meaning making, polyvocal feminist testimonios provide one means through which “dominant group members [can] expand their sense of their own interests by attending to opaque interests,” and by recognizing our interconnectedness and interdependencies with others (Hames-García 121).

While the diverse perspectives and narrative accounts allow for possibilities of greater epistemic wholeness as authors and readers from divergent worlds come into textual contact, the stories of testimonio—as a rule—always start from the standpoint of the oppressed, staking a radical claim that those most affected by power maintain a unique position to best understand and critique its workings. As argued by Henze, “[o]utsiders cannot simply investigate the effects of oppressive power structures in their own lives; on the contrary, their relationships to the oppressed require them to understand systems of oppression from the perspectives of the oppressed, producing less partial awareness of matrices of power” (247). When readers respond justly to the narrative call of polyvocal feminist testimonio, it can be understood as a post-positivist realist exercise

that asks us to consider the truth-value of the practitioners, to think from their perspective, even as we are unable to escape our own.

By placing our worldview in dialogue with others—even in this imaginative, intangible way—we make conceptual room for the possibility of thinking beyond our own self-interests and ourselves. As readers of polyvocal feminist testimonios, a responsible interpretive account might look something like this: “by supplementing my perspective with hers, I am enabled to make better-informed choices about my own actions—actions that resist or contribute to the oppression that I may only witness secondhand” (Henze 247). This self-reflexive response guards against what Kimberly Nance terms “fusion,” or over identification with the narrator, as well as unproductive disengagement, and replaces these interpretative responses with a responsible consideration of what the text enables us to know, and do, from our social locations.

The responsive reader, like the practitioners themselves, must therefore consider how to establish “imaginative,” not “imaginary” ways of identifying with the narrative accounts housed within the text:

Outsiders wishing to support the liberatory work of the oppressed must form responsible and imaginative alliances—alliances grounded in appropriate reconceptions of their experiences in relation to others. That is, we should not work toward *imaginary* identifications of ourselves with others, in which we make claims about our ‘sameness’ without regard for the real differences in our experiences and lives; rather, we should work toward *imaginative* identifications of ourselves with others, in which we

interrogate our own experience, seeking points where common ground or empathy might be actively constructed between us while remaining conscious of the real differences between our experiences and lives. (Henze 248)

Henze suggests the difference between “imaginative” and “imaginary” is parallel to the difference between “analogous” and “equivalent,” a reading posture that is encouraged by *testimonio* in its active discouragement from having readers self-identify with the narrative speakers (Sommer 108). While polyvocal feminist *testimonio*'s representational practices do not guarantee that a reader will act responsibly in relation to the social information housed within the text, they serve as a potential site to move the reader to critical consciousness. As Freire reminds us, coming to critical consciousness is a continual process, with “potential” consciousness superseding “real” consciousness (Freire 115).

To conclude, the polyvocal structures employed by feminist *testimonio* do more than call attention to a sanctioned social situation. Through their innovative polyphonic, story-based narrative frameworks they offer new avenues for considering the epistemological relevance of experience. By insisting on the truth-value of experience narratives, while also insisting that an individual account's truth-value is not fully realized until it is brought into sustained dialogue with others, polyvocal feminist *testimonio* insists that social meaning making is a collective process that benefits from the diversity of its meaning makers. In so doing, it embodies an expansive coalitional politics that extends its dialogic methodology to readers who no doubt occupy different

social and material worlds. By understanding the theoretical significance of testimonio's story-based methodology to deliver social analysis through marginal experience narrative, we are reminded of the necessity of destabilizing narrative's relegated position as outside of knowledge proper. For "[w]hen we theorize the intellectual value and historical role of stories, we can more self-consciously and self-critically cross disciplinary borders and reclaim stories as integral components of human thought" (Stone-Mediatore 13). The remaining sections are concerned with the specific structural framings and modes of rhetorical address employed by practitioners of polyvocal feminist testimonio to anticipate and shape such processes of reading engagement and to enact a "theory in the flesh."

***Section Three: Activist Deployments of a Writing Project at Work: Polyvocality, Pedagogy, and Praxis in Collaborative Feminist Testimonio***

"Seven women, seven lives, countless aspirations, worlds, dreams, and struggles. Sometimes, the threads of our lives get entangled with one another, and at others, they isolate themselves and scatter [...]. What we have achieved in this first phase of our journey is difficult to describe—a self-confidence, a collective spirit, a deep respect, for one another, and a much sharper vision to live and fight in a society whose chains burn us and ignite us to smash and break them. At the same time, only by suffering under the weight of those chains are we able to imagine new possibilities that allow us to chart the directions of our upcoming battles."

~Sangtin Writers, *Playing With Fire*

So mark the opening lines of the Sangtin Writers' *Playing With Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism Through Seven Lives in India*, a collaboratively written narrative that interweaves nine testimonial voices—seven of which belong to village-level NGO activists in Uttar Pradesh—in its exploration of a collective feminist methodology through which to realize more egalitarian organizing efforts. The *sangtins'* penetrating words strongly resonate with a poetics of solidarity articulated by many polyvocal feminist testimonios that actively foreground the material and ideological conditions that

wedge themselves between the felt realities and the hopes and dreams of the women located at the center of their narratives. The multilayered tensions articulated in this passage— between the individual and the collective, oppressive realities and the promise of liberated futures—remain a staple in such works as they attempt to illustrate the effects of macrosocial power structures in women’s daily lives while documenting the ways in which women actively struggle against processes of marginalization.

Published in 2006, the Sangtin Writer’s *Playing With Fire* (itself an extended translation of the original Hindi version, *Sangtin Yatra*, published in 2004) is a fiercely committed and energized piece of testimonial literature that requires us to reconsider John Beverley’s absolutist claim that “the moment of testimonio is over” (“The Real Thing” 280). Indeed, this section argues that contemporary feminist activist polyvocal testimonios at once utilize and recreate testimonio as a methodological tool to realize the creative and political visions of activist women’s groups in their socially situated contexts. It at once answers and builds upon Nance’s call for sustained rhetorical analysis by identifying prevailing structural patterns and rhetorical tropes utilized within the narrative framing of contemporary feminist activist polyvocal testimonios.

Specifically, this section focuses on the processes of collective meaning making such texts reflect through their self-consciously collaborative methods of creation, and how this enables them to at once model and enact possibilities for feminist coalitional alliance building attuned to a complex politics of difference. Insofar as these feminist activist testimonios utilize this writing form as a methodology, they do more than “document” or “describe” their projects in textual form. Rather, these polyvocal activist

testimonios *embody* their political visions through their very structural and rhetorical framings. As articulated by the Sangtin Writers, “*Playing With Fire* does not so much document or reflect the theory and praxis of collaboration as it enacts them. Theory of collaboration is generated *as praxis*” (154).

More so than engaging with individual narratives housed within the text, this section attends to each work’s structural scaffolding to illustrate how their polyvocal structures model the dialogic, collaborative ethos driving these writing projects, thus productively queering the boundaries of theory and method, individual and collective goals, and the processes of action and reflection that renew and redirect the type of political work testimonios are capable of performing. In so doing, they directly insert themselves into the fraught terrain of knowledge production by staging targeted representational interventions that actively contest current trends in development initiatives that frame participant testimonios of marginalized social actors as “raw material” in need of further “expert” analysis, and in the process creatively rework deeply entrenched power differentials.

This section engages with a selection of testimonios compiled by activist women’s groups from distinct geopolitical locations all of which are outside of the immediate Latin American context: Sangtin Writers, *Playing With Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism Through Seven Lives in India* (2006); The Latina Feminist Group, *Telling To Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (2001); Beverly Bell, *Walking on Fire: Haitian Women’s Stories of Survival and Resistance* (2001); and Sistren Theatre Collective, *Lionheart Gal: Life Stories of Jamaican Women* (1986). A brief overview of

each text's trajectory and stated goals attests to testimonio's ability to traverse increasingly diverse cultural and political terrain.

The Sangtin Writers' *Playing With Fire* is set in Sitapur District of Uttar Pradesh, India, an area thick with international development initiatives. The collective formed out of concern for how Nari Samata Yojana (NSY), the non-governmental organization (NGO) that (at one time) employed eight of the nine Sangtin Writers,<sup>50</sup> reinforces social hierarchies along the lines of class, caste, and religion through bureaucratic practices that undermine their stated efforts to "empower" underclass women, including undervaluing the contributions and labors of the village-level activists who consist *of* and work directly *with* the women the organization purports to serve.<sup>51</sup> One of the main critiques of the *sangtins* about the gap between NSY's theory and practice is that while it seeks to "empower" *dalit* women (lower caste affiliation), most of its employees are *sawarn* (higher caste affiliation).

The collective labors that produced the book took place over a thirty-four month time span, beginning in March 2002, and included in-person meetings as well as electronic correspondence as a result of members living on different continents. The collective discursively represent themselves as "*sangtins*," an Awadhi (an oral, local language of Uttar Pradesh) word meaning "of solidarity, of reciprocity, of enduring

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<sup>50</sup><sup>50</sup> Nari Samata Yojana (NSY) is a pseudonym used by the *sangtins* to refer to a well-established NGO that operates under the banner of women's empowerment. Eight of the nine *sangtins* were at one time employed by this NGO and their experiences with the organization are what initially prompted the formation of their collective.

<sup>51</sup> *Playing With Fire* weaves together the collective voices of nine *Sangtins*, seven of which become the "autobiographers" of the narrative. This choice was made out of awareness of the significant class and power differentials existing between the seven village-level NGO workers (Anupamlata, Ramsheela, Reshma Ansari, Shashibala, Shashi Vaish, Surbala, and Vibha Bajpayee) and Richa Singh and Richa Nagar. At the time of publication, Richa Singh was a regional coordinator at NSY. Richa Nagar is a trained geographer and Women's Studies professor at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

friendship among women; it is used by a woman to refer to her close female companion who sees her through the trials and tribulations of life” (*Playing With Fire* xxiii). The original Hindi edition, *Sangtin Yatra*, thus translates as “a journey of sangtins” (xxiii). *Playing With Fire* marks one moment of a continuing journey of writing, dialogue, and organizing, by reflecting on the limitations and possibilities of NGOs’ ability to enact foundational social change, and seeks to reach “those who are invested in (or disenchanted by) the notion of ‘empowering the marginalized’” (xxiii).

Going back twenty years to a text that documents the collective dialogic processes that inform the story-based form of consciousness raising that the Sistren Theatre Collective (founded in 1977) uses as the seeds of creation for their theater productions, *Lionheart Gal* charts a complex picture of pressing social concerns faced by (mainly) black working-class Jamaican women. The collective’s namesake, “Sistren,” refers to the Jamaican Creole/Patwah term for “sisters.” While the book was initially meant to provide a methodological overview of the collective’s production processes, the project quickly transformed into a collection of members’ life stories when their trajectories and themes proved too dynamic and multi-faceted to be reduced to secondary evidence. Through this reconsidered focus, the editor and then theatre director Honor Ford-Smith suggests the stories reveal the impact of development on women and “illustrate ways in which women can move from the apparent powerlessness of exploitation to the creative power of rebel consciousness” (xiii). The book’s topics range from early motherhood to intimate partner violence, working and living conditions to critiques of education,

political participation and rebellion, thus thoroughly critiquing the idea that “women’s issues” remain in the terrain of the private sphere.

Beverly Bell’s *Walking on Fire* continues a concern for “multiplying the narrative,” and is aimed at complicating static, monolithic representations of Haitian women by focusing on the creative means of resistance Haitian women use to *bat tenèb*, “beat back the darkness” (xiiv). Similar to *Lionheart Gal*, this collection focuses on a number of social issues that, while not typically considered “women’s issues,” testify to the ways in which domestic and international policies destabilize women’s struggles to maintain economic stability and cultivate dignified lives, while simultaneously attesting to the “rebel consciousness” that keep these women’s hopes and dreams alive. *Walking on Fire* differs from the other texts in that Bell does not write as an immediate member of a women’s collective. Rather, Bell conducted interviews with women from several different organizations between 1991 to 1994 and incorporates thirty-eight of them in the book’s final form, thereby providing a broad picture of the diverse ways Haitian women engage in resistance efforts.<sup>52</sup> Rather than discursively framing the life narrators as “interview subjects” or “research participants,” Bell importantly refers to them as “*griyos*,” a Haitian Creole term denoting a well-respected teller of Haitian history that actively blurs the boundary of “story” and “history,” as well as “official” and vernacular accounts. These historical narrative accounts are termed “*istwa*” in Creole.

The Latina Feminist Group’s *Telling to Live* at once lays genealogical claim to and stretches the idea of testimonio by bringing it into the unlikely realm of the US

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<sup>52</sup> While Bell’s process cannot properly be called “collective,” it nonetheless employs a collaborative feminist methodology in which she worked closely with the collection’s storytellers to ensure she properly transcribed their stories and not merely her interpretation of them.

academy. The eighteen member collective was first configured by a group of Latina academics in 1995 with the goal of working through important sociohistorical differences (ethnic, national, religious, linguistic, class, sexual, and U.S. regional) that cut through the pan-ethnic configuration of “Latinas” in a way that often gets glossed over as a result of solidarity efforts. One of the book’s central preoccupations is accounting for the simultaneous social privilege and marginalization—and resulting contradictions—the co-authors experience as racialized subjects who nevertheless hold advanced degrees and teach in U.S. post-secondary institutions. After a seven-year collaboration, marked by especially productive summer workshops in Baca, Colorado, the book became a byproduct meant to testify to the ways in which testimonio became a central methodology in conveying themselves to each other and in theorizing *Latinidades*. The Group refers to themselves as *testimoniadoras*, testifiers, of their *papelitos guardados*, guarded papers.

Out of these four feminist polyvocal testimonios,<sup>53</sup> all but *Playing With Fire* position the various women’s narratives side-by-side within the narrative frame; *Playing*

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<sup>53</sup>I do not merely “assign” the term “feminist” to describe these texts; rather, each project employs the descriptor. Still, the productiveness of women-specific organizing efforts is continually subject to debate, especially within the three texts that emerge from sociopolitical spaces laden with “women and development” efforts (Jamaica, Haiti, India). The narrators of *Walking on Fire* and *Playing With Fire* explicitly express a desire for feminist initiatives to work in tandem with people’s movements concerned with economic equality and land reform. As articulated by Selitane Joseph in “Chunk of Gold,” “my biggest problem with some women’s organizations is that they think that women alone can wage the battle. It’s not true! Men are exploited as well as us. We ask men and women to band together so we can overturn this bone-crushing system, this cursed system. We have to keep our eyes open because if women and men are divided, the place we want to go to—we’ll never get there” (Bell 143). This sentiment is strikingly echoed by the Sangtin Writers who ask, “can real equality be achieved in our society if we isolate gender difference from all other differences and base all our strategies and conversations on the gaps between women and men? When we know that the nature and form of gender differences cannot be comprehended in any context without connecting them with caste and class differences, then the inability to raise questions about classism in our own organizations gives our work the shape of an animal who uses

*With Fire* further complicates this polyvocal form by braiding together individual voices and interweaving the stories with a collaboratively generated comparative analysis within the body of a thematically framed chapter. With the exception of *Walking on Fire*, these texts emerge as part of established collectives and therefore serve as byproducts that seek to document brief moments of much longer political journeys.

Each work also differently employs a decolonizing use of Standard English by “bending” it to serve their immediate needs. That is, rather than utilizing English as a transparent, translational mediation device that waters down the forceful political message of the “original,” these works use English to performative effect. *Telling to Live* straddles English and Spanish, at times depending on one language more than the other, more often fluidly interweaving the two. *Lionheart Gal* is written to represent the sounds and phrasings of oral Jamaican Creole. *Playing With Fire* is an English translation of the Hindi transcribed *Sangtin Yatra*, itself a translation from the Awadhi dialect the autobiographers originally used in their diary reflections. *Walking on Fire* is an English translation from the Haitian Creole spoken during the interview process. These texts also

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one set of teeth to show and another one to chew!” (116). Such single-issue platforms make little sense indeed.

Calls for intersectional approaches to confront women’s social marginalization do not dismiss the political value of women-only organizing spaces. Rather, these spaces are only critiqued when they give way to divisive effects, as in the case of NGOs’ and development programs’ implementation of gender-specific programs that do not simultaneously address oppressive class structures. Rosemie Belvius, a Haitian organizer for land reform and an activist who has implemented both women-specific and cross-gender initiatives argues for the continued importance of women claiming gender-specific space within larger social justice initiatives: “it’s important for us to organize as women. When women are with men, then men take the posture of intellectuals and the women don’t like to speak. And the women’s power never comes to the fore. But women together looking for a solution bring fruit. We’re reshuffling the cards” (Bell 147). As these discussions indicate, like everything else within the covers of these reflexive, deliberative testimonios, the utility of the term “feminist” is continually subject to debate. More than signaling a gender-specific focus then, this qualifier more importantly signals an egalitarian and politically motivated mode of inquiry that is evidenced in feminist testimonio’s use of nuanced collaborative methodologies attentive to the possibilities and foreclosures of differently positioned women coming together to work around collectively defined sets of social issues.

employ culturally resonant metaphors that firmly anchor them to the cultural spaces from which their narratives emerge. Additionally, *Playing With Fire* and *Walking on Fire* directly insert themselves in ongoing debates on the politics of knowledge production. Both collections fiercely insist that the women at the center of the texts be understood as primary knowledge producers, proactively shaping the interpretive processes of readers who are poised to hear their testimonies as “raw material” in need of further “expert” analysis.

While the interventions of *las testimoniadoras*, Sistren, the *griyos*, and the *sangtins* take aim at different institutional structures as a result of their disparate social contexts, the broader implications of these projects nevertheless parallel with a centrally named goal of the *sangtins*, which is to “reshuffle” (to echo *griyo* Rosemie Belvius) the “expectations about who can produce knowledge; the languages, genres, and forms in which knowledges get produced; and how new knowledges gain relevance as they interact with different audiences” (*Playing With Fire* xxvi). The life stories utilized by these texts therefore serve to challenge elitist modes of knowledge production by putting forth disparate formations of grounded theory, or as Aurora Levins Morales suggests, perform a practice of “making theory out of the stuff in our pockets, out of the stories, incidents, dreams, frustrations that were never acceptable anywhere else” (*Telling to Live* 32). Indeed, in many ways each of these collections respond to Selitane Joseph’s question and suggestion: “What did the big women’s meeting in Beijing do for us Haitian women? We haven’t seen any effects. Why don’t they come and sit with us peasant women to see how we’re living today?” (*Walking on Fire* 142). These staged

textual productions invite the reader to listen to their own ideas about how to address the particular issues they face as gendered subjects.

Of course, the accessible language and vernacularized sentiments of these “homemade theories” can deceptively keep from view their utilization of sophisticated structural framings and modes of rhetorical address as a means of entering into the uneven terrain of knowledge production. One productive way of calling attention to the performative aspect of feminist activist polyvocal testimonios is to differentiate between their “backstage preparations” (read: the political work informing, but falling outside the narrative frame) and their “staged performances” (read: the material presented within the final textual frame). In “Retelling Stories, Resisting Dichotomies: Staging Identity, Marginalization, and Activism in Minneapolis and Sitapur” by Sofia Shank and Richa Nagar, the authors speak to the political salience of this interpretive approach:

We highlight the importance of ‘backstage preparations’ (the necessary conversations about vulnerabilities and experience, as well as their translations) and the ‘staged performances’ or final scripts (those stories we actually decide to translate and tell) . . . Defined in this way, activist theater can be regarded as a political and theoretical platform that self-consciously engages with representation by deliberately constructing, framing, and performing any and every story. In so doing, political theater and activism directly engage, utilize, and confront representation as a central concept that guides the action, and allow us to foreclose the concept of ‘direct access’ to experience, or the idea of a transparent

rendering of story . . . through the centrality of staged performance - that spatial relationships are foundational in determining the ways in which representations are transmitted and maintained between the performer and the audience. (Shank and Nagar 9-10)

By considering feminist activist polyvocal testimonios in terms of “staged performances,” we not only release ourselves, as readers, from unrealistic expectations to access unmediated truth claims through their narrative accounts, we are also better poised to understand their self-conscious use of representational paradigms to creatively rework power imbalances between practitioners and their reading audiences. Additionally, if as Shank and Nagar suggest, “spatial relationships are foundational in determining the ways in which representations are transmitted and perform,” beyond the relationship between reader and audience, we can consider how the spatial aspect of polyvocal frameworks actively performs a dialogic model for coalitional alliance building across social difference.

As a prominent manifestation of their staged interventions, in each of these texts the traditional model of the testifier/witness is reworked, allowing the practitioners to take more control over how their representations will be received, and complicating and reclaiming the genre from a simplistic politics of recognition. Specifically, this section addresses how these texts recreate and revitalize the political heft of testimonio to better suit feminist activist efforts in three main ways: a collaboratively established polyvocal framework attuned to a complex politics of difference; a process- versus product-based approach as evidenced by expansive methodology sections that document modes of

dialogic engagement, especially between members of a collective; an explicit pedagogical rhetoric that encourages readers to become potential allies and to incorporate the interpretive practices performed and modeled within the text into the reader's daily life practices.

The multi-voiced, or polyvocal, practices espoused by these collections range from the literal incorporation of several voices and subject positions to the inclusion of different textual mediums and language systems. Their process-based approach is marked by extended methodology sections that document the terms of collaboration undertaken throughout the project, an overview of the social landscape in which each project emerges and seeks to intervene, and a reminder that the book marks only one component in a much longer political journey. Each work also performs a series of rhetorical directives to build empathetic readerships and alliances. This is accomplished both on a macro-level through the overall structural narrative framing and incorporation of appendices, and on a micro-level through modes of direct address located in the methodology section and within individual narrative accounts. While these works attest to the importance of sustained dialogic practices undertaken by the practitioners of a given testimonio, they also articulate a larger commitment to sparking dialogue with activists and social justice related projects in different locales. These networking and solidarity building efforts reinforce the simultaneous local/global commitment of each project.

Beyond these overarching parallels in structural framings and narrative tropes, the diversity of representational choices made by each text complicates any easy

understanding of “good” versus “bad” representation. Rather, each work’s discursive choices are context specific, choices that are accounted for in the introductory sections and that create a conceptual framework for the personal narratives. This section seeks to account for these telling overlaps and departures in an effort to highlight how these four feminist activist testimonios at once bespeak an overarching feminist methodological pattern and while still corresponding with site-specific representational needs.

The representational strategies and organizing principles of feminist activist polyvocal testimonio are guided by a commitment to non-hierarchical modes of activism that allow the historically disempowered to put power to productive use. The collaborative ethos that underpins these collections thus serves as a catalyst for the innovative collective methodologies undertaken throughout the body of these texts and that enact a complex politics of difference that model possibilities for coalitional feminist alliance building. The chapters within this section thus serve to articulate key representational practices that enable these works to *enact* rather than merely “document” their feminist visions. In the remainder of this section I perform sustained rhetorical and structural analysis to illustrate how the increasing geopolitical diversity and structural complexities espoused by feminist testimonios extend the epistemological and political reach of this hybrid writing form.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> A brief note on my own methodological style within this section. In an attempt to extend the dialogic function of polyvocal feminist testimonio, the structural format of the rest of this chapter is to work across texts by theme in an effort to interweave individual contributions and place them into direct conversation. Like polyvocal feminist testimonio itself, this mode of analysis works to bring each text into dialogue with each other without forcing them into false resolve, therefore more readily highlighting their overlaps and departures. As Chandra Mohanty has argued, working through difference allows us to more fully theorize commonalities (Mohanty 226). Furthermore, in an effort to avoid replicating the ways in which academics often dismiss experiential knowledge claims as “raw material” in need of further analysis, I often rely on direct quotes from each text in order to prevent from overwriting the particular voices and perspectives

## Chapter Six: ‘Another Way of Telling the Story’: Co-Narration and Multilingualism in Feminist Collaborative Testimonio, Variations on a Theme

“As women reevaluating our present we began to realize we had a past [...] Listening to ourselves as well as to our grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and to women of different histories, ethnicities, social classes, and cultures—has been important in the context of this changed vision.”

~Margaret Randall, “Reclaiming Voices: Notes on a New Female Practice in Journalism”

It has become commonplace to identify testimonio by its use of a representative “I” set in metonymic relation to the experiences of the “we” whereby “individual testimony evokes an *absent polyphony of other voices*, lives, and experiences” (Zimmerman 112, my emphasis). Yet, as early as Margaret Randall’s foundational *Cuban Women Now* (1974) and *Sandino’s Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle* (1985) there were already testimonios in the process of rendering an otherwise “absent polyphony” *present*. While Randall is one of many feminist oral historians to explore alternative representational paradigms, her particular innovative feminist oral history methods have certainly “traveled” into contemporary feminist activist polyvocal testimonios. Rather than subsuming disparate sets of experiences under one voice meant to represent the many, Randall conducted multiple oral histories with the women involved in these cultural revolutions and positioned their interview responses *side-by-side* each other within the narrative frame, exposing the seams of testimonio and highlighting the subjective nature of testimony itself.

Randall’s formatting decision importantly complicates the readership’s relation to her work by extending the dialogic function of testimonio from one of text to reader to the participants themselves. That is, a careful reader does not just encounter a series of

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with overly generalized academic speak. My analyses serve to highlight how the knowledge claims put forth by each individual text are in dialogue with the other works, and how they correspond with overarching genre patterns. Thus, while my own voice certainly comes through, it is my hope that it remains one of many, fulfilling more the role of facilitator than interpreter.

individual interviews but is rather able to hear a conversation emerging between interviewees, a direct result of placing differing accounts of specific events in close proximity to each other. By letting the contradictions remain, Randall's technique makes room for the epistemological possibility of co-existing truths. Her narratives resist stasis by representing the fluidity of truth and insisting upon the dynamicity of cultures in flux.

For example, in *Sandino's Daughters*, Randall frames the first chapter through an explication of how The Luisa Amanda Espinosa Nicaraguan Women's Association is so named to honor the first woman member of Nicaragua's National Liberation Front to die in combat (1). Giving the reader a subtle, but formative directive to "listen while women from the association recreate its history" (1), Randall dedicates the second section of the chapter to a series of interviews with Espinosa's family, friends, and comrades in an effort to provide a three-dimensional account of her life and the immediate circumstances that led to her death.

This recreation of Espinosa's life and death through the narratives of those closest to her illustrates Randall's commitment to producing knowledge that is not only accountable, but also *responsive* to her interview subjects. In hearing how the revolutionary figure of Luisa Amanda Espinosa was central to how Nicaraguan women understood themselves as central actors of the revolution, Randall deems it important to dedicate an entire section to this woman's memory. The chapter also serves as a powerful example of collective decision and meaning making, one that calls attention to the subjective nature of testimony, with individual accounts offering conflicting interpretations and information on Espinosa's life and the circumstances of her death. By

letting these contradictions remain, Randall makes room for the epistemological possibility of multiple co-existing truths, without positioning any one truth-claim as more true or false than another.

In considering the number of contemporary polyvocal feminist activist texts that emerge as byproducts of women's collectives it becomes clear that an emphasis on dialogic processes between participants—the importance of them witnessing themselves and each other—has been “listened” to. While traditional testimonios have employed an “I” that is “we” to provide a sustained situational analysis of how larger power structures are felt and experienced at the level of marginalized social actors, contemporary feminist activist testimonios often incorporate multiple voices and subject positions. This collective resonance positions culture as a contested terrain while highlighting how the similarities and divergences between individual accounts enable a three-dimensional understanding of sociohistorical conditions in a situated context. Through the heterogeneity of experiential perception, fragmented truth claims subtly emerge; these then need to be pieced together and worked through in order for epistemic wholeness to more thoroughly materialize. The effect is a multi-voiced framework that necessarily interrupts homogenous, monolithic representational practices.

*Playing With Fire, Walking on Fire, Telling to Live, and Lionheart Gal* each attest to this, often theorizing their use of a polyvocal structure as a way of resisting static, essentialist representations of “women” and “culture” and as a purposeful strategy in enacting feminist collaborations attentive to a complex politics of difference. For example, in *Lionheart Gal*, Ford-Smith provides an authorial directive for how audiences

should interpret the book's multi-voiced structure: "The stories can be read individually as accounts of ways in which women come to terms with the difficulties in their personal lives. However, within each story there are different emphases such as work, housing, relations with men and children; so that taken together, they are a composite woman's story, within which there are many layers of experience" (xiii). Reminiscent of the side-by-side style of Randall's oral histories, Ford-Smith attests to the simultaneous individual and collective truth-value of each tale, and encourages readers to engage with the "many layers of experience" the *present* polyphonic style allows for. By listening for the overlaps and departures between individual accounts, Ford-Smith highlights the effectiveness of truth through thematic and experiential repetition.

Similarly, in the introduction to *Walking on Fire*, editor Beverly Bell contextualizes the significance of the variegated interview responses the text houses by arguing, "The women's diverse responses to their realities call for expansive analyses, challenging monolithic assumptions often made about people in poor and black countries. Through their *istwas* [stories], the *griyo* [storytellers] defy cultural and gender essentialism and implicitly rebuff any attempt to create a paradigm or symbol of 'Haitian woman'" (xvi). If Bell's directive serves to provide a critical framing for enabling readers to make sense of the co-existing truths within the collection, the members of the Latina Feminist Group articulate how their text's final polyvocal structure is reflective of how testimonio as a method of experiential storytelling enabled them to attend to layers of meaning and difference commonly overlooked within the consolidated "Latina" identity descriptor: "*Testimonio* was critical for breaking down essentialist categories

since it was through telling life stories and reflecting upon them that we gained nuanced understandings of differences and connections among us. These revelations established respect and deeper understanding for each of us as individuals and as Latinas” (11). Through its dialogic function, telling and listening to individual testimonios allowed members to at once dissect and re-inhabit their “Latina” identities through the self-conscious espousal of a nuanced understanding of this solidarity-based label. In so doing, they counterbalance a less careful, imposed, and/or self-protective understanding of the term: “We self-consciously use ‘Latinas’ as a coalitional term. We are not homogenizing and leveling our differences into an idealized, unified national/ethnic heritage” (5).

The Sangtin Writers also attend to a complex politics of difference by articulating the purposefulness of the polyvocal, collaborative quality of *Playing With Fire* for resisting overly generalized and stereotypical representations: “Even as a ‘blended we,’ the collective articulates, negotiates, and narrates the complex meanings of heterogeneity, difference, and diversity. We show how seven actors, who might conventionally be lumped together as ‘rural poor women of Sitapur,’ self-consciously come together to understand their own lives and struggles as interwoven with local structures of class, caste, religion, and gender as well as with broader processes of development and globalization” (141). Recounting these careful negotiations of the individual and the collective highlights not just the importance of understanding *difference within*, although they certainly accomplish this.

It simultaneously works to more fully understand what these differences mean by developing a clearer picture of the *relationality between* women within the collective: “As we narrate and interweave seven stories of motherhood and political coming of age, we analyze each woman’s struggle with caste, religion, and gender politics in relation to those of six others. New layers of understanding and consciousness unfold as we reevaluate the autobiographers’ own past interactions” (142). In this way, *Playing With Fire* parallels Chandra Mohanty’s claim that “differences are never just ‘differences’” (226). Rather, in moving from positions of critique to reconstruction, the “challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully” (Mohanty 226). Within this formulation, the individual is never eclipsed for the purposes of the collective; it is precisely this tension between the “I” and the “we” that allows for a cross-border coalitional posture. Hence, the multi-perspective representational practices of polyvocal activist testimonio serve as meta-framings that allow the texts to literally embody the complex politics of difference they advocate.

Indeed, the many-voiced structure of contemporary feminist activist polyvocal testimonios strongly coincides with Mohanty’s suggestion that “common differences” form the basis of meaningful feminist solidarity (225). For the Sangtin Writers, as with Sistren and the Latina Feminist Group, the process of generating individual life writings in order to then share and juxtapose them with others’ within the collective is a way of working through existing social differences and hierarchies in order to develop a more complex understanding of how group solidarity can be achieved, in terms of what issues

members are collectively committed to organizing around and how they have personally come to identify these issues as important through the sharing of their experiential knowledge.

The polyvocal structure thus serves as a powerful symbol of collective meaning making and alliance building by encouraging multiple—often-contradictory—truth claims to emerge without forcing them into a false reconciliation. If Randall’s side-by-side structure initially served to expose the seams of collective knowledge production, contemporary polyvocal feminist testimonios continue to theorize and elaborate upon the ways that attention to working through social difference can help to forward social justice efforts. By experimenting with how these political methods can be represented in textual form, these works cultivate new ways of imagining and embodying responsive and accountable political postures in coalitional practices.

While these works each employ a polyvocal framework, their utilizations of this underlying structure vary in chosen political purpose and narrative form. Whereas *Walking on Fire*, *Telling to Live*, and *Lionheart Gal* position individual women’s stories as stand alone narratives within the body of the text—continuations of the side-by-side format—*Playing With Fire* opts instead for a “blended but fractured ‘we’” (elsewhere articulated as a “braiding” of the collective’s voices), to further represent their bond as *sangtins* without glossing over the disparate positionalities and power differentials that exist within the group. While blended in the sense of interlocking narratives, this “chorus” of voices does not remain constant through the book. Rather we are told, “[a]s one of us speaks, the voice of the second or third suddenly blends in to give an entirely

new and unique flavor to our music. Our notes blend, disperse in ones or twos or sevens, and regroup” (xxxiv), creating a palimpsestic effect.

Beyond the musicality of this metaphor, it highlights the fluid, deliberate shifting of voice(s) throughout the book—at one moment featuring the particular experience of one woman, augmented by an apposite experience of another, then coming back together to produce a collective reading of what these dissonances mean: “While Radha was subjected to scornful meddling for not producing a child after three years of marriage, here was Sandhya, feeling a different kind of pressure: *not* to have one” (59). Such experiential juxtapositions remind us that truth cannot be separated from context. The constant tension maintained between the individual and the collective—the recognition of each woman’s story as important enough to stand on its own while simultaneously recognizing the social significance of a chorus of critique—is also visibly maintained by added spacing between individual autobiographers’ narratives. These visual breaks serve as an illustrative reminder that individual subjectivity is not overwritten by processes of collective meaning-making. These “variations” on similar cultural experiences within feminist activist polyvocal testimonios serve to remind us how social structures enact themselves differently on the bodies of disparately positioned social actors, all the while referring back to the “same economy” (Scott 779). As theorized by the Sangtin Writers: “today we know very well that it is only when we juxtaposed the stories of our personal lives and saw them with new lenses that we were able to arrive at a point where it is becoming possible for us to honestly reevaluate the inequalities pervasive in our work field” (130).

More than stylistic preference, the polyvocal structure works to highlight the epistemological importance of dialogue for the reader, and to facilitate their own focused dialogic interaction with the text. Co-narration thus provides a lens for resisting pre-determined, static, impermeable identity categories, and replaces them with possibilities of purposeful, cautious, and intentional border crossings. By going beyond the mere incorporation of side-by-side narratives, texts such as *Playing With Fire* structurally reflect the political purpose the juxtaposition of experiential knowledge claims has served within the collective. Such a maneuver invites readers to adapt a similar lens when reading their work, and to integrate this lens into their daily interpretive practices by extension. The innovative co-narrational frameworks of feminist activist polyvocal testimonios at once cultivate new ways for imagining solidarity and invite readers to interact with their world with new eyes. In the process, they extend the political reach of testimonio by expanding the ways in which such texts “work” on the reader.

Indeed, *Playing With Fire*'s particular deployment of polyvocality is not only for poetic effect, or merely concerned with “diversifying” representations of Indian women's lives. As suggested, as members of a collective who have organized around the ways in which NGOs define “poor rural women's issues” without the input of women who occupy these social positions, the *sangtins* are committed to representing themselves as knowledge producers who do not need to rely on outside interpreters: “We want to interrupt the popular practice of representation in the media, NGO reports, and academic analysis, in which the writing voice of the one who is analyzing or reporting as the ‘expert’ is separated from the voice of the persons who are recounting their lives and

opinions” (xxxiv). In addition to using a “fractured we” to better tailor the writing form to suit their immediate needs, the Sangtin Writers include very few direct quotes from the writing journals from which they base their narrative, leaving the reader to distantly encounter third-person accounts of their stories. While all *testimonios* are mediated to various degrees, this authorial decision performs its own stated theoretical commitment by providing the collective’s own interpretations of how each autobiographers’ experiences individually and collectively mean, and delivering an explicit reminder that *Playing With Fire* does not provide mere experiential “raw material” for a professional or academic elite.

While this narrative decision makes sense in the context of *Playing With Fire*, the different situations and contexts in which the other projects emerge would not enable this structure to work as well for both representational and political reasons. For instance, since Bell’s *Walking on Fire* is not the result of a collective but is rather comprised of individual interviews with Haitian feminist activists working in different areas and around a varied set of social issues, the replacement of transcribed interviews into a third-person narrated assemblage could signal an attempt to overwrite the voices of the individual *griyos*, of consolidating them for the purpose of Bell’s own imposed agenda, or of translating their theory-in-the-vernacular to more “acceptable” academic prose. Similarly, while *Telling to Live* boasts a fully collaboratively generated introduction, the Latina Feminist Group’s commitment to deconstructing the extreme glossing of difference the pan-Latina term enacts upon feminist social actors with widely different ethnic, national, religious, class, and sexual histories makes it undesirable for them to

speaking from a mediated third-person narrative perspective. As stated by Luz del Alba Acevedo, “*nudos de poder* (nodes of power) could be loosened and united through a process of collaboration and polyphonic negotiation of difference” (261).

Rather than “resolve” these representational struggles by submerging differences beneath an “fragmented we” slot, members of the collective wanted the ability to have final say on the framing of their particular stories. Furthermore, given the Group’s relative privilege and knowledge of feminist theory as U.S. Latina academics, a central part of the exercise is to undergo the labor of enacting the same methods on themselves as they have enacted through their research: “Many of us, in one way or another, are professional *testimoniadoras* [producers of testimonios] . . . [yet many of us] had not yet experienced being on both sides of the process, sharing and generating our own *testimonios* with each other as Latina scholars” (2). It is therefore simultaneously an issue of political importance (in an effort to highlight the diversity of “Latinas”) and relative social privilege (as literate, lettered Latinas) that the authors pen their own individual testimonio accounts. The varied voices, perspectives, and structural forms housed within *Telling to Live* textually testify to the diversity of perspectives, experiences, and skill sets espoused by U.S. Latina academics.

Beyond the incorporation of multiple narrative accounts, polyvocality is expressed through other formal aspects as well. For instance, in addition to written text, *Telling to Live*, *Walking on Fire*, and *Lionheart Gal* all add visual components to their narratives. *Lionheart Gal* incorporates artwork inspired by Caribbean and Jamaican folklore and resonant themes from its collection’s life stories, some of which was later

turned into templates for the silk-screening projects Sistren undertook to generate income for their theater projects (Ford-Smith, Personal Interview). The cover image is the most intricately detailed, inspired by a scene of the collection's "Veteran by Veteran" and incorporates images of Erzulie (Haitian goddess of sexuality), Yemaya (Yoruba mother goddess), Obatala (androgynous god/dess of purity, truth, peace and wisdom), and Ni (guerilla warrior priestess and queen of the Maroons).<sup>55</sup> Thus, polyvocality within *Lionheart Gal* is also achieved by an explicit visual evocation of how the struggles of Sistren's members deeply resound with the intergenerational histories and legacies of diasporic black women.

*Lionheart Gal* also incorporates a posed photograph of the collective into the finished text, a decision mirrored by *Telling to Live*'s incorporation of candid and posed photos of the Group from their foundational 1995 conference in Baca, Colorado.

*Walking on Fire* differently uses photography by providing snapshots of individual interviewees throughout the collection, named and positioned beside their narrative accounts. This multi-textual element visually signals how these truth claims are put forth as embodied knowledge, literally rooted in lessons learned from women's daily lives, whether individually or collectively expressed. By writing the body back into the text, these texts work against the abstraction the written word can produce. As stated in *Telling to Live*, "[a]s we give testimony, our bodies awaken, revealing our *llagas* (wounds) and our joys. Our stories celebrate the awakening of our bodies as we also acknowledge the cost exacted because of our gender, race, class, and sexuality" (263).

The inclusion of photographs in *Walking on Fire* seems especially important, since

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<sup>55</sup> This information is provided in the "Cover Illustration" description of *Lionheart Gal*.

although the collection and interview process was fairly collaborative in its employment of participant-focused feminist methodologies, it is still not the product of a collective, which means the *griyos*' fingerprints are less present than in the other projects. By including photographs Bell attends to whatever representational lack this may produce.

Polyvocality is also expressed by an incorporation of structurally variant narrative forms. For example, in *Telling to Live*, *las testimoniadoras* write in the forms of poetry, essay, diary writing, and experimental prose. Additionally, in the "Resistance as Expression" section of *Walking on Fire* Bell includes the *istwas* of different cultural workers: a poet, a singer, a visual artist, and a dancer. Bell emphasizes their articulations of what these forms of creative expression mean to resistance struggles by integrating their song lyrics, poems, and visual art. While the medium of dance does not translate as easily to a written mode, the text nevertheless includes a linguistically fluid description of dance from dancer Florencia Pierre: "This dance is a language. It's a means, a tool, to allow you to speak, to recount your suffering, to recount your pain, your joy, to recount the happiness of your heart. It is dance that does everything, everything, everything, and is everything for me" (89).<sup>56</sup>

Poet and *griyo* Alina "Tibebe" Cajuste also reinforces the epistemological significance of Bell's decision to include these varied linguistic modalities as integral forms of knowledge production: "I am a person who doesn't know how to read, who doesn't know how to write. But I'm intelligent, my spirit works . . . . That's how I come to think—always in terms of poetry. That's what makes my brain work, what makes me

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<sup>56</sup> Bell also includes a photograph of dancer Florencia Pierre, which seems especially poignant since this is the closest she can get to incorporating the corporeal element of dance in written form.

live, too” (76, 81). Bell’s incorporation of Cajuste’s poetry reinforces how social knowledge can be housed within multiple forms of expression, and thus puts forth a vision of polyvocality that moves beyond the incorporation of multiple voices and perspectives to one that extends its relevance to the language and modes of expression ideas are housed within by having the *griyos* speak through and about the mediums of their choice.

Rather than subsuming disparate experiences under a collective “I” that represses social difference in an effort to maintain a united front, polyphonic testimonios illustrate how social truths speak louder and fuller when contradictions are encouraged to resound. In this way, feminist testimonios push beyond considering testimonio as a pre-defined genre. Rather, they employ this hybrid writing form as a tool, with an underlying methodology that is capable of nurturing political projects that maintain a commitment to working through difference. By tweaking and adapting this writing form to suit their needs, polyvocal feminist testimonios utilize multi-perspective and multi-media representational practices that embody their espoused political and theoretical commitments. As the next section explores, this commitment to polyvocality also extends to linguistic difference.

*Multilingualism in Feminist Polyvocal Activist Testimonio: Linguistic Subjectivities of Resistance*

“The language in which ideas are expressed is never neutral. The language people use reveals important information about who they identify with, what their intentions are, for whom they are writing or speaking . . . Language is wedded to content, and the content I seek is theory and intellectual practice that will be of use to me in an activist scholarship whose priorities are, above all, democratizing.”

~Aurora Levins Morales, “Certified Organic Intellectual, *Telling to Live*”

“Language lives intimately linked to time and place, is informed by history and ideology, music and meaning. A new and evolving understanding of language has enabled us to hear our multiple voices and offer them (often in translation) to others.”

~Margaret Randall, “Reclaiming Voices: Notes from a New Female Practice in Journalism”

Beyond the incorporation of multiple voices and perspectives, mediums, and narrative forms, contemporary feminist activist testimonios extend the relevance of polyvocality through careful consideration of the language systems employed to assert knowledge claims. If language is a fundamental way in which we enact our subjectivity in social culture, it cannot be denied that language is a central constituent of our cultural identity. As articulated by *Lionheart Gal*, “language is a political issue central to all power relations. It expresses the soul of a people” (xxix). Polyvocal feminist testimonios therefore actively displace an understanding of language as utilitarian by giving careful attention to how language describes and reflects the corporeally absent self in written representational forms. *Lionheart Gal*, *Playing With Fire*, *Telling to Live*, and *Walking on Fire* each subscribe to an intimate and living notion of language, as illustrated through their self-conscious straddling of language systems and linguistic registers.

As texts that seek to interrupt elitist practices of knowledge production, these testimonios are strategic in their language usage, with an eye turned towards their respective audiences and how to best realize their immediate goals. While each of these texts employ Standard English to various degrees, they differently arrive at and employ this linguistic choice. They also each “bend” its usage to suit their needs while qualifying how and why English became the central language to communicate the social knowledge each project puts forth. For instance, as director and founder of the Center for Economic Justice in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Beverly Bell translates her interviews, conducted

in Haitian Creole, into English in an effort to reach U.S. reading audiences. Bell qualifies this decision with the claim that “the book is not written in the Haitians’ language. Even if it were, most Haitian women do not read. Even if they did, most would not have the money to buy the book nor the time to read it” (xvi). Bell seizes the opportunity to succinctly summarize the vast material discrepancies that exist between Haiti and the U.S. and to denaturalize her use of English by reframing it from a paradigm of assumed inevitability to a political choice that is circumstance-bound.

The other texts make similar tactical language decisions. Honor Ford-Smith’s encoding of Sistren’s stories into a written translation of Jamaican Creole at once serves to undermine a cultural elitism that has designated Creole a “lesser” language while simultaneously testifying the continued presence of the British colonial legacy in contemporary life. As a collective that does not uniformly identify Spanish or English as their primary language, the Latina Feminist Group decides to incorporate both languages, with individual *testimoniadoras* choosing how much or how little Spanish to include in their narrative accounts. Finally, *Playing With Fire* accounts for its English usage in terms of circumstance and as a multiply translated work. While individual autobiographers originally expressed themselves in Awadhi, a local dialect of Uttar Pradesh, the Sangtin Writers made the decision to publish their book, *Sangtin Yatra*, in Hindi to reach a broader audience of Indian activists and NGO employees. The (re)translation of *Sangtin Yatra* into English is further explained as a way to counteract the disciplinary measures NSY took to reprimand the Sangtin Writers for writing critically of the organization by gaining transnational support (154).

In addition to the formal language systems each text works within, they further adapt these languages to resonate with the historical and local circumstances through which they emerge, and therefore must attend to intra- as well as inter-national language bias. Each text attends to the politics of their language usage by discussing their negotiations to varying degrees in their introductions. In the case of *Lionheart Gal* Ford-Smith articulates why and how she chose to transcribe the narratives in written Jamaican Creole: “The whole collection reflects the gamut of language used in Jamaican society and its relationship to class. In the main we hope *Lionheart Gal* makes a case for prose writing in Patwah or creole as the academics call it. Patwah/creole/dialect—the very confusion about what to call it reflects the national insecurity about the language issue” (xxviii). Ford-Smith takes the opportunity to discuss at length the political intent of representing the narratives through a written translation of the oral language the women of Sistren use in their daily lives: “we all know that Jamaican people reflect all the time in their heads or in conversations in Patwah, and we also know that reflection is part of the process of gaining control over one’s own life. So, why are certain kinds of written language still dominated totally by English? . . . [n]ot to nurture such a language is to retard the imagination and power of the people who created it” (xxix).

Still, the language varies between narrative accounts as Ford-Smith replicates the particular language patterns of individual narrators, with distinctions falling along class lines within the group. For instance, while Ford-Smith conducted oral interviews with many of the members, she states how these did not work as well with the middle-class members who expressed themselves in Standard English, and who were more

accustomed to expressing themselves in written forms. Though she has been critiqued for what has been viewed as maintaining a rigid class distinction within her work through this editorial choice (Cooper 90), I argue that attempting to erase these class distinctions by having middle-class narrators narrate in a voice not their own would be just as problematic as translating the oral Creole accounts into Standard English.<sup>57</sup>

*Lionheart Gal* also draws heavily on Jamaican and Caribbean folkloric traditions. As argued by Carolyn Cooper in “Writing Oral History: Sistren Theatre Collective’s *Lionheart Gal*”: “The language of narration is Jamaican, employing proverb, earthy metaphors and folk-tale structures, particularly repetition and apparent digression. In addition, the rural setting of many of the stories reinforces the sense of a ‘folk’ perspective” (89). Ford-Smith frames the introduction by evoking the images of Nanny of the Maroons (Ni), a historical figure credited with leading slave rebellions and whose legacy has since taken on mythic proportions as folkloric warrior (xiii). The language of folklore is therefore central to the book’s methodology, encoded within an oral language that pays respect to the “legacy of tale-telling which has always preserved the history of Caribbean women” (xv). This framing is strongly paralleled in the introductory section of *Walking on Fire*, “The Women of Millet Mountain.” Recounting an early memory of Bell’s introduction to Haitian women’s oral storytelling practices, Bell recounts a telling of the tale of Anacaona, an “Indian queen” who bravely fought against the Spanish invaders and who was killed by their hand (1). Anacaona’s legacy serves to historically

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<sup>57</sup> In “Writing Oral History: Sistren Theatre Collective’s *Lionheart Gal*,” Carolyn Cooper explores these points more thoroughly, arguing that Ford-Smith’s decision to write the introduction in Standard English undermines the language politics she argues for. Cooper presents a compelling counter-argument by writing the second half of her academic article in Jamaican Creole as both challenge and response.

testify to the courage of Haitian women. Argues *griyo*, Josie, “From Anacaona we were born. When you take our history . . . there were women there standing strong, right next to men. But they’re rarely told about in history . . . unless a woman does the telling” (2).

In fact, each text draws upon culturally specific storytelling practices, including the use of locationally distinct metaphors and paradigms. For example, *Playing With Fire* uses the metaphor of “monsoon clouds” to address the weight of the tears the women experienced when sharing their stories with each other (9). Later, the *sangtins* frame inadequate attempts made by development initiatives to address rural poverty in India through proverb-form: “The resources made available to the rural poor can be likened to a cumin seed in the mouth of a camel: they are too small to have an impact” (129). In *Walking on Fire*, Bell uses the metaphor of “*peze souse*” to epitomize the conditions of poor Haitian women: “Popular snacks in Haiti are *peze souse*, squeeze and suck, frozen pops...The *istwas* in this chapter are told by women being consumed like a *peze souse*” (24). In *Lionheart Gal’s* “Rock Stone a River Bottom No Know Sun Hot,” the narrator illustrates her point by recounting a saying her mother used to repeat: “‘Member seh man a green lizard,’ she used to say. ‘Man is a ting weh change. Di instant when dem see one next woman, dem no waan bodder deal wid yuh, especially when dem see yuh tight pon yuh money.’ Yuh see, she was disappointed by a man and dat cause her fi go tru a whole heap” (45). Meant to teach her daughter to be wary of relationships with men, her mother’s encoding of men as “green lizards” illustrates the pedagogical creativity of the folk tradition, while the daughter’s decoding (marked by,

‘Yuh see’) highlights how the faculties of the imagination are also used to interpret social truths.

Similar to *Lionheart Gal*, *Walking on Fire*, while written mainly in Standard English, incorporates several phrases and expressions represented through a written version of Haitian Creole. It also incorporates interview responses that directly address the importance of using the Creole to communicate with lower class Haitians who do not have access to Standard French, as in Lelenne Gilles’s “I’ll Die with the Words on My Lips” (68). Bell is also careful to frame the interviewees in terms of “*griyos*,” a Creole word for storytellers of history, “the repositories and transmitters of wisdom and knowledge” (xv). As Bell articulates, the “best description of these narratives is the Creole word *istwa*, meaning both story and history. Borrowing on the tradition of the venerated storyteller, which stretches back to Africa and extends across Haiti, those who give their *istwa* here are termed *griyo* . . . [i]n this predominantly oral culture, the *griyo* guard the word and determine how the word is spoken. The women in *Walking on Fire* are far younger than traditional *griyo* elders, and to my knowledge none holds this honor in her own family or village. Yet in this book, they are the keepers and recounters of history, truth, and wisdom” (xv). Similar to *Lionheart Gal*, by providing a preliminary framing that roots the stories to their historical and cultural context, Bell alters the way in which readers come to engage with the work.

Of the four texts, *Telling to Live* is the only one *not* to include an extended glossary for phrases and vocabulary falling outside of Standard English. This too is a political choice. As a U.S. based text, the work’s mixture of English and Spanish is a

political act in a cultural climate in which Spanish is framed as a linguistic invader to an English-only American identity. So too is the Latina Feminist Group's decision to assert knowledge claims through both languages an enactment of the linguistic borderlands, and a linguistic embodiment of hybridized knowledges and cultural identities. Indeed, more so than Hindi, Haitian Creole, and Jamaican Creole, Spanish occupies an increasingly dominant position in U.S. culture, and the non-inclusion of a Spanish glossary indirectly comments on the need for non-Spanish speakers to overcome linguistic and cultural monolingualism and to interact with the Group's reflections on their own terms and in their own language(s).

As suggested, in each of these texts, the self-conscious decision of the practitioners to position themselves as knowledge producers directly bears on each collection's language choices. By representing social knowledge claims in their own voices—linguistically, idiomatically—these *griyos*, *sangtins*, *testimoniadoras*, and Sistren model forms of resistant linguistic subjectivity, a linguistic praxis that democratizes knowledge production. Lest we question the ability of theory-in-the-vernacular to successfully reach the “halls of power,” the fallout of *Playing With Fire*'s language choices proves that one need not only operate in globally dominant language systems to strike institutional fear. As the *sangtins* recount, it was not their English translation that led NSY to take up disciplinary efforts against the eight *sangtins* who (at the time) worked for the NGO that served as the object of their critiques. Rather, it was precisely their adoption of local languages—specifically Awadhi and Hindi—and their locational and discursive proximity to the institutional practices they critiqued that led to

NSY's panic: "Because *Sangtin Yatra* launched the collective's critique in a form that refused to isolate the voices of the nine authors or to highlight the 'expert' voices of a research or a higher-level NGO official, and because the critique was circulated and disseminated in the political and discursive spaces of the 'vernacular' where grassroots NGO actors operated, it became dangerous" (141). The *griyos* in *Walking on Fire* provide a similar analysis regarding the function of the radio station Radio Cacique under the Duvalier regime in the 1980's, a self-defined "station of struggle" that delivered the news in Haitian Creole in an attempt to reach poor populations who were either illiterate, did not speak French, or both (68).

As these examples illustrate, the ability of language to reinforce or destabilize dominant structures of power is context specific, and testimonios must therefore carefully consider questions of audience when asserting knowledge claims. The multilingual and multi-perspective practices espoused by polyvocal activist feminist testimonio also importantly allow for the possibility of connecting with multiple audiences. By alternating between language systems and registers, culturally specific and far reaching idioms, these polyvocal framings allow for specific analyses to simultaneously reach the ears of disparate reading audiences in different registers. Indeed, *Playing With Fire* states its motivation for its original Hindi publication as symbolic that "those ideas were being produced, first and foremost, for the group's own communities, friends, and close allies rather than for dissemination to the activists from above" (xxxvi).

In contrast to the long held assumption that the primary function of testimonio is to reach the ears of a first world audience in order to cultivate support, contemporary

polyvocal feminist testimonios utilize co-narration and multilingualism to connect with other social justice projects and to embody their theoretical and methodological processes in paradigms capable of furthering egalitarian feminist organizing initiatives. The next chapter speaks to this trend through their development of extended methodology sections that convey the extra-literary and behind the scenes processes that inform the production of the final textual product.

### **Chapter Seven: Resisting Representational Stasis: Testimonio as Process, or Dialogic Collaborations in Flux**

“Our purpose in describing our process of coming together and collaborating over seven years is to illustrate how we came to theorize feminist *latinidades* through *testimonio*. While our writings may stand on their own, our collaborative process, which used the method of *testimonio*, ultimately was framed by common political views about how to create knowledge and theory through our experiences. In this way, product and process became inseparable.”

~The Latina Feminist Group, *Telling to Live*

“The complexities of these processes cannot be captured by a formula, nor can this kind of writing ever be contained within rules. For this reason, in the following pages you will find that even when a conversation on a specific topic begins, its focus moves in multiple directions.”

~Sangtin Writers, *Playing With Fire*

Insofar as each of these texts self-consciously enters into the politics of knowledge production as a way of writing against static, monolithic representational models, they must somehow account for how their storytelling methodology works to articulate social knowledge in *flux*. In order to accomplish this, these works move beyond a polyvocal structure in order to actively frame how they want readers to understand their critical interventions and contributions. One of their central framing strategies is the development of extensive methodology sections, often housed within the introductory sections, as a way to set the stage for the social knowledge their life narratives put forth.

While texts such as *Rigoberta Menchú* and *Lionheart Gal* establish critical frameworks within their introductions for understanding the underlying political assumptions and trajectories of their projects, more recent texts such as *Walking on Fire*, *Telling to Live*, and *Playing With Fire* demonstrate how feminist methodology sections have in recent years grown increasingly detailed. By actively highlighting a work's underlying theoretical impetus, such discussions work to legitimize their story-based methodology as knowledge that should be taken seriously by institutional spheres of knowledge production, including academia and development initiatives. If the testimonio is the result of a women's collective it also documents how the group's collaborative processes of writing and reflection become translated into book form and how the book connects to their larger political commitments.

As evidenced by *Walking on Fire* and the work of Margaret Randall, even when a feminist testimonio is not the result of a collective process, the methodology sections intricately document the extent to which feminist collaborative methods have been employed, in turn challenging the dichotomization of theory and method. By highlighting the collective labors that have produced the finished document and bringing into view the particularities of the practitioners' social worlds, the texts render visible the complex social processes that have brought their texts into existence. Through a discussion of the extra-literary factors that have shaped the finished document, feminist activist testimonios highlight a critical component of their intellectual, political, and representational praxis: a process, rather than product-based, approach.

Similar to the espousal of a polyvocal framework, this commitment to process can be traced back to foundational feminist testimonial methods. In “Reclaiming Voices: Notes on a New Female Practice in Journalism,” oral historian Margaret Randall refers to this self-consciously collective, dialogic mode of telling and listening as a “practice,” a way of “telling a story [that] is not product-oriented like the traditional (male-defined) balanced on “events” and portraying them as static . . . we offer process” (61). As a democratic narrative-based storytelling methodology attentive to nuance and social contradiction, the processes that create the space for these life narratives to emerge are just as important as the stories themselves, especially given the pedagogical intent of these works. By insisting on this process-based approach, feminist testimonios offer nuanced engagements with questions of privilege and power in collaborative projects and the power of experiential-based narratives to articulate social knowledge, while reminding us that the organization and production of knowledge are of equal importance as the final product.

By providing detailed methodology sections that rehearse the collective labors that inform the document, feminist polyvocal activist testimonios are able to simultaneously reach different audiences in different registers, and provide them with the extra-literary factors that will be most valuable for the ways in which they encounter the narratives. For instance, if readers are of the socially privileged variety that literary criticism on traditional testimonio has assumed, these methodology sections verse them in the sociopolitical specificities that have created the social problem in which the work seeks to intervene. If the readers are already embedded in social justice efforts, the

documentation of a collective's processes can help generate ideas on how to adapt and enact the methods espoused by the collective to suit their own situational needs. The visibility of labor processes can also affect the ways in which unversed, uncommitted readers come to interact with the text. Similar to my call to understand these texts as "staged performances," by framing their collection of stories as "work," the likelihood of readers reducing them to transparent, positivist evidence is greatly diminished.

Still, it is both irony and strength that the same feminist works that resist analytical and representational stasis through the penning of dynamic life narratives boast intricately detailed methodology sections that record anything from specific dates of group meetings, to gender-based economic statistics, to clear statements of a project's intended goals. I suggest that this trafficking in traditional analytical paradigms (i.e. recognizable "academic speak") serves a Sandovalian purpose. By utilizing familiar paradigms of what constitutes "knowledge," these works gain legibility and trust. Such careful documentation and framing is both poignant and practical; should the fluid, multilayered representational practices evidenced by the nuanced storytelling methods of polyvocal testimonio raise doubts on whether a given text lacks a central theoretical framework—or whether it is "just" a collection of compelling stories—the methodology section serves to displace these suspicions with an articulation of each project's focused interventions and goals.

Of the four texts, *Playing With Fire* and *Telling to Live* both employ the term "methodology" to refer to their projects. While *Telling to Live* explicitly names testimonio as its methodology of choice (8), *Playing With Fire* articulates how the

*sangtins* chose diary writing as a centerpiece through which to realize their methodology: “Our main goal at the outset was to imagine and mold a methodology that would enable us to reflect and understand our lives and work and give us the strength and perspective to envision our future directions” (8). This responsive and context-aware approach evidenced by the descriptors “imagine” and “mold” bespeak an open-ended, explorative methodology—“let’s try this and we’ll see where it takes us”—that most explains feminist testimonios’ decidedly pedagogical and process-based, rather than product-oriented, approach. Rather than “applying” a one-size fits all set up to give way to premature conclusions, these projects reveal how they adapt relevant aspects of pre-established testimonial-based activist methods to best suit their individual projects in a way that is both focused (“what do we want to get out of this?”) and flexible (“how should we go about achieving this?”; “what do we take these responses to mean?”).

As stated, one of primary pedagogical functions of the methodology sections is to highlight the particularities and cultural situatedness of their place-based critiques for a readership unversed in these specificities. Before mapping out the specifics of their interventions then, practitioners paint a detailed social backdrop from which their projects emerge. These conditions of emergence may alternately be located temporally, organizationally, or materially, and help to set the imaginative stage for contextualizing each collection of life stories. For instance, *Playing With Fire*, *Walking on Fire*, and *Lionheart Gal* each incorporate brief histories and statistics meant to raise the consciousness of their readership by introducing critical aspects of the cultural landscapes with which they engage.

In the “Status of Haitian Women” subsection of *Walking on Fire*’s introduction, statistical information is provided on the gendered division of labor, women’s roles in factory work, intimate partner violence, state-sponsored violence, and gendered property rights (18-19). The introduction to *Lionheart Gal* similarly provides a gendered account of employment rates and the division of labor, while also providing information on women-headed households and the role of migration (xvi). In *Playing With Fire*, the *sangtins* provide statistics on the socioeconomic conditions of Sitapur District, while also summarizing the area’s sociopolitical landscape, with a particular emphasis on NGO’s introduction to the area in the mid-1990’s (xxvi). *Lionheart Gal* and *Walking on Fire* perform similar sociohistorical overviews for readers unacquainted with the area’s specific context. As a text set in the political landscape of the US academy, *Telling to Live differently* situates its place in genealogical relation to Chicana feminist thought. These quantitative elements serve to reiterate testimonio as a “socioliterary” writing form, as well as to highlight the social science training of many of its practitioners.

These place-based framings occur on other textual levels as well. As stated, Bell and Ford-Smith locate the women’s stories within Haitian and Jamaican cultural folkloric traditions. *Playing With Fire* locates the place-based ethos of the *sangtins*’ analyses by documenting how this text, a translation of the Hindi book *Sangtin Yatra*, is meant to bring attention to the disciplinary action brought against them for writing critically of NSY (xiii). The “place” that *Playing With Fire* occupies is therefore as situational and ideological as it is geopolitical; by cultivating a transnational network of solidarity it places itself in a larger struggle over knowledge production.

The importance of place is also evidenced on a more literal level by documenting the conditions under which the collectives and interviewees met. For instance, in *Walking on Fire* Bell paints a detailed picture of the material and cultural conditions in which the interviews were carried out:

Women told their stories in sweltering tin shacks with flies buzzing around our sweat-covered bodies, in dirt yards with goats or chickens, and in an underground organizing center scarred with the broken windows and battered doors of a recent military attack. One woman recounted her story on a rooftop in a raging thunderstorm, another in a vodou temple, a third in a busy coffin-manufacturing workshop. The women and I sat on cement floors or lumpy beds or chairs with no seats. Often it was a strain to hear the women over the noise of children and roosters and car horns. Over and over, meetings took place in the pitch darkness of a *blakaout*, blackout, when whole parts of town—more often than not, the poor parts—lost electricity. (xiv)

If this passage borders on perpetuating a possibly dangerous picture of the desperate material conditions in which Haitian women find themselves, it is a line toed with purpose. The sensorial directives cueing the bustling sounds, extreme heat, and lack of comfortable meeting spaces (whether due to economic, militaristic, or infrastructural concerns) reinforce the devotion and seriousness with which the *griyos* convey their stories. What might seem to be extreme conditions to a socially removed reading audience are instead put forth as the familiar sounds and events of daily life. This

descriptive passage thus brings to life a dynamic, sociopolitical backdrop that sharpens the significance of the poignant insights delivered by the *griyos* in less than ideal material conditions.

*Telling to Live* also focuses on the significance of the physical space in which the collective met—Baca, Colorado—but instead shifts its focus to the spiritual and symbolic dimensions of this meeting place:

Baca is literally on the Central Divide, in the middle of the country. Meeting at Baca was fortuitous, a real turning point for us as a group . . . Part of the magic of Baca is that historically it is a site of spiritual meaning, a sacred space for Native Americans where there have never been wars between indigenous peoples. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains are the mythical place of emergence for the Navajo, who were displaced by the violent incursions of Spanish and Anglo settlers. Today Baca is home to a diverse group of spiritual traditions, including a Christian monastery, a Buddhist temple, a Zen meditation center, and a Hindu ashram. For us, Baca became a site that inspired narration. (13)

Baca's location in the middle of the U.S. is certainly noteworthy given the collective's commitment to bridging regional differences within the U.S. But it also goes beyond this. Given the social intimacies and overlapping histories of indigenous and Latino groups in what became the U.S., Baca is also significant in its particular history of settler colonialism, and the ways in which historical displacement continues to affect social relations within the current U.S. landscape. Finally, as a project committed to working

through social difference, the multiple spiritual centers currently located in Baca, in tandem with its historic lack of inter-group conflict between Native Americans, marks it a powerful site of successful border crossings and negotiations. Indeed, if the Latina Feminist Group considers its “sustaining practice of community” as a “gift to other Latinas, particularly young women, to inspire them to create their own expressions of feminist Latina identities,” then the border-crossing ethos of Baca seems especially resonant (21).

Once context is established, the methodology sections provide an overview of the prompts and goals that motivated the project/collective. The documentation of the specific prompts that led to each work reinforce what issues they deem most important, and why specific themes remain prominent in the main body of the text. In *Lionheart Gal*, a text concerned with understanding how women are oppressed *as women* in the Jamaican context, Ford-Smith relied on three initial interview prompts: “How did you first become aware of the fact that you were oppressed as a woman? How did that experience affect your life? How have you tried to change it?” (xxvii). In reading these three preliminary questions, one is better able to see the skeletal progression of *Lionheart Gal*'s individual narratives: an articulation of one or more childhood events that raised questions for the speaker on the inevitability of their gender restrictions; a description of consequences, emotions, and life choices stemming from these events; an agential perspective on overcoming and/or facing these circumstances.

In *Walking on Fire*, Bell recounts a more open-ended prompt: “Tell me anything you want about your life, about what it's like to be a Haitian woman” (xv). The

collection's organization of thematic chapters seeks to account for the wide-ranging responses she received, with "resistance" as the enjoining theme ("Resistance for Political and Economic Change," "Resistance as Expression"). In the case of *Playing With Fire*, initial life writing focused on childhood, adolescence, and sexuality (xxix), topics which were used as a way to articulate sites of inherited social difference and that influenced social tensions between individual members of the collective, and which were exasperated by the hierarchical NGO structure most were employed by. Similar to the rest of the text, the specific prompts are not included in the final manuscript so as to direct attention away from the "raw material" of their labors and to refocus on *how* and *why* life writing was used within the larger project. This rhetorical choice can again be understood as a critique of hierarchical NGO and dominant research practices where the testimonies of oppressed subjects are used as raw materials to advance agendas that the storytellers are completely distanced from.

Often, these initial prompts are responsible for facilitating multi-stage projects. Both *Playing With Fire* and *Telling to Live* highlight their reliance on a series of prompts in which the responses given in response to specific question sets shaped future directions of the collective, as well as the next set of prompts. As self-professed *testimoniadoras*, the initial prompts that shaped *Telling to Live* operate on a meta-level that bespeak the group's prior awareness of testimonio as methodology: "How do we bear witness to our own becoming? How do we define who we are? How have we made *testimonio* the core of our work? What are some important turning points of consciousness? What is our relationship to political identities and intellectual work? What is our relationship to

building new paradigms or models? What are we transgressing?” (12). While individual accounts range from thought provoking to stylistically stunning, the overall textual effect is marked by a lack of internal consistency that seems symptomatic of this ambitious—and intangible—question set. Indeed, the strongest resonances across texts speak to the more concrete and experientially-based question subset focused on why and how women within the group came to academia: “Why did we pursue higher education? What did we think we were doing? What was the enticement? What did we get out of it?” (13). Still, if one of the collective’s goals is to more thoroughly articulate the overlaps and departures between Latinas with distinct ethnic, national, religious, and sexual background, the unruly range of topics and forms actively writes against the effects of pan-ethnic consolidation.

While the inclusion of thematic prompts works to actively frame what issues brought the practitioners to collectively pursue the project, the authors also state the text’s pedagogical intentions by articulating the specific goals they hope to achieve through this discursive representation of their labors. These framings are as diverse as their social situations. While *Walking on Fire* places importance on diversifying representations of “poor Haitian women,” the *sangtins* downplay their concern with representational “accuracy,” arguing instead that the “usefulness or effectiveness of *Playing With Fire*, then, can be assessed not in terms of whether it accurately or authentically represents the *sangtins* to the readers but on the basis of whether and how it can become a part of the authors’ individual and collective agency and serve activism out of which the book evolved” (154). In *Lionheart Gal*, Ford-Smith focuses on the importance of creative

expression in women's processes of self-actualization by suggesting that the stories "attest to the fact that when women select their own creative organisational forms, they begin to build a base from which they do transform their lives" (xx). Ford-Smith places particular emphasis on Sistren's *collective* creative process; for Sistren, a central function of *Lionheart Gal* moves beyond gaining "recognition" for the lives of working class Jamaican women by illustrating the type of knowledge that can be produced when linking the creative and political through artistic collaboration.

In the spirit of their process-based approach, the methodology sections do not simply state the project's "hoped for" goals; they also document the path leading up to the finished document by making visible the accumulated "backstage" labors of their "staged performances." In doing so, they work to render their story-based methodology intelligible *as* legitimate social knowledge while simultaneously critiquing and transforming the way in which knowledge is generated dominant sites of knowledge production generally, and in academia in particular. This is especially true of testimonios that are authored as part of a collective. As the above examples highlight, significant effort goes into documenting such details as how and when the collective first emerged; the issues around which they organize; the conditions under which they met; critical dates, events, and stages that shaped the process and form of book writing; internal and external challenges and how they have been addressed; how the book fits into the collective's larger goals and political platform. Beyond the articulation of the organizational and logistical concerns the project/collective faced, the practitioners also

maintain a painstaking focus on detailing the level of thought, consideration, and labor involved in the processes of memory and dream work that produced the final document.

Out of the four texts engaged in this chapter, *Playing With Fire* and *Telling to Live* are the most explicit in framing their books in terms of labor and work. A subsection of *Playing With Fire*'s introduction is solely devoted to "The Labor Process" (xxix). In the introduction to *Telling to Live*, the Latina Feminist Group informs the reader that the production of the text "involved an elaborate collaboration and division of labor among eighteen women of diverse Latina backgrounds . . . [w]hen we think about the work we have accomplished, we envision not only the product but the human connection between us, the *cariño* (affection), *respeto* (respect), and commitment to each other" (xi). As this passage illustrates, it is not just logistical, but also *emotional* labors that are given weight and rendered visible. *Playing With Fire* similarly attests to the essential role that vulnerability played in strengthening group commitment (xxxvii), and reinforcing how almost no group meeting went without tears.

Emotional labor is positioned as a critical component of each project, with trust being an overlapping theme. But it is not a naïve trust that is vocalized. Rather, it is a trust born out of extended dialogue, time spent together, and intellectual and political disagreement. The documentation of intra-group trust born out of sustained dialogue is perhaps most notably attained by how the testifiers discursively frame themselves as "*sangtins*," "Sistren," "*testimoniadoras*," and "*griyos*," culturally resonant terms that denote an intra-group commitment to reciprocity, accountability, and solidarity. Collective emotional, intellectual, and political trust thus become necessary ingredients

for moving beyond superficial solidarity efforts, crossing social boundaries, and establishing lasting relationships with group members that extend beyond the collective's immediate contracted goals.

Insofar as the methodology sections bring into view the multi-faceted labor processes laying outside the purview of self-contained life narratives, this focus on labor also dovetails with another critical component of their collaborative methodologies: dialogic process. As Paulo Freire explains, “dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between the dialoguers is the logical consequence. It would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue—loving, humble, and full of faith—did not produce this climate of mutual trust, which leads dialoguers into ever close partnership in the naming of the world” (91). As Ford-Smith recounts in an afterword penned in 2005, “This commitment to dialogue and to small-scale coalition and collaboration across what is now called difference was the ethical centerpiece of the early work of Sistren, and of this collection . . . It would not have been possible without a commitment to this process over a protracted period of time” (296). A similar political conviction is articulated by the Latina Feminist Group who argue, “[t]o write and theorize about a range of Latina experiences, however, required being in sustained dialogue with one another. Hence, we were motivated to convene physically in one place and begin this process” (9).

The importance of sustained intra-group dialogue is reiterated by *Telling to Live*'s assertion that “sharing can begin a process of empowerment” (1). In *Lionheart Gal* Ford-Smith highlights how the production of the book is one manifestation of the collective's dialogic processes of writing and reflection: “Each finished testimony still remains to be

discussed as fully as it deserves within the group. In a sense until this is done, the work process will not be complete” (5). Even when the works are not the result of a collective, individual life narratives highlight how the practitioners are elsewhere involved in collective efforts. As Claudette Phene suggests in *Walking on Fire*’s “A Little Light”:

“When you get into an organization, you change completely. What makes you change? I come to see you, know you, share ideas. That allows a change in both of us” (115).

While a wider readership is invited to read and engage with the knowledge produced by each text, this focus on sustained intra-group dialogue reinforces how the immediate discussions internal to the collective are most important for the accomplishment of their immediate goals. In this way, feminist testimonios redefine the dialogic function of traditional testimonio by insisting that their primary relationship is with the women who have braved and bared their stories through extensive processes of telling/writing and reflecting, often in a collaborative setting; not the normatively defined “primary” relationship between reader and text.

In form and function, such documentation of a group’s dialogic processes re-emphasizes how the labors of writing and reading, remembering and dreaming, constitute political *work*. An anticapitalist sentiment in itself, these pieces insist that it is through the listening and telling, writing and reading, where the real work, on the part of the practitioners—lies, and not in the finished document: “[T]he process leading to the creation of *Sangtin Yatra* and the journey that continues as a result of it are as critical for its authors as the text is, if not more so” (*Playing With Fire* xxiv). This sustained focus on the collaborative (emotional and logistical) labors and dialogic commitments of each

project importantly interrupts a top-down paradigm of knowledge production in which socially privileged, lettered “experts” from outside of the social circumstances we write about are privileged over the situated critiques made by social actors located within them. This is precisely the dynamic that *Playing With Fire* hopes to redirect, arguing that their own notion of accountability “is based on the idea that knowledge must emerge out of sustained critical dialogues with those who are the subjects of that knowledge. Through these dialogues, the subjects of knowledge become the primary evaluators, critics, and intellectual partners of those who are seen as the experts” (xlvi-xlvii).

If it is true that “dialogic praxis is pushed to the margins” in mainstream academia (Nagar and Swarr 8), then it is also true that feminist polyvocal testimonios self-consciously position the dialogic processes that have enabled them to produce social knowledge front and center. Harkening back to the influential methodology of Margaret Randall, dialogue is not just about the act of telling; it is just as much about listening. Particularly listening to those who have historically been silenced: “As women reevaluating our present we began to realize we had a past . . . We began to understand that our collective as well as our individual memories have been invaded, raped, erased . . . Listening—to ourselves as well as to our grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and to women of different histories, ethnicities, social class, and cultures—has been important in the context of this changed vision” (60). Adds *griyo* and former Minister of the Status and Rights of Women, Lise-Marie Dejean, “If you want decentralized power, you must begin by sitting with people and listening to them” (160).

Just as these works give voice to the importance of dialogue within their methodology sections, they also solidify how their texts embody a form of representational praxis by continuing to reference the importance of dialogue *outside* of their framing sections by attesting to the centrality of dialogic methodology within individual life narratives as well. By incorporating detailed testaments on the power of dialogic throughout the body of the text, the works reiterate the power of interpersonal dialogic exchange to produce foundational social change, while actively highlighting how their dialogic methodologies mean beyond the locational specificity of their chosen intervention. This representational choice necessarily shifts the reader's interpretations from each story as final product to a more careful awareness of the processes and underlying theory that led to the development of the text. The continuous meta-evocation of dialogue allows the practitioners to testify to the centrality of dialogic methodologies to their project.

This methodological commitment to process and intra-group dialogue is present in the life stories of each collection. In "Veteran by Veteran," the narrator recounts the pedagogical function of sharing experience in a group setting: "Me haffi tek me own time and find nobody force notten pon me. Di only way me could a get exposure is by mixing meself wid odder people. Me gather experience from dem, den me go one side and tink bout plenty tings dat puzzle me" (*Lionheart Gal* 157). In the context of this passage, dialogue is configured as a more democratic production of social knowledge than the top-down and rote memorization tactics the narrator encountered in a school setting. By working through her own experiential knowledge base and putting it into

dialogue with others, the narrator collects other pieces of social knowledge and formulates her own conclusions by situating her truths in relation to them. More still, it performs a self-conscious praxis by breaking with the narrative frame to enact a formal aside that attests to the processes that led her to the truths she puts forth in the narrative.

Importantly, this continuous emphasis on dialogic process is not readily interpreted to suggest that the stated foundational dialogic principles of “sharing” and “trust” were arrived at easily. Rather, the texts reinforce how sharing and trust are markers of the sustained emotional labor the project/collective achieved through hard work. As member of the Latina Feminist Group Luz del Alba Acevedo recounts, “What I experienced was the kind of friendship built through disagreements, critical discussions, and caring constructive arguments directed to enrich rather than diminish and discredit our personal lives and work” (261). A critical enabling factor in these productive interactions is that rather than assuming shared perspectives and experiences, the Latina Feminist Group began with a deconstruction of “Latina,” an exercise that gave way to productive critical dialogue between members with different knowledge bases and social perspectives, or as the collective suggest, “an open negotiation of difference” (20).

This careful attention to social difference between women marks a critical departure from earlier feminist consciousness raising initiatives based on a presumption of sameness and social sharedness as “women,” and in so doing enacts a new paradigm in which difference need not be suppressed for solidarity to be achieved. This philosophical divergence is well-noted by Chandra Mohanty, who in the foreword to *Playing With Fire*, suggests how “the memory work of the Sangtin Writers embody the differences *within*

women's collectives—the caste, class, and religious tensions that enable women from distinct backgrounds and lifeways to work, struggle, and imagine a collective space of empowerment for themselves and their sisters . . . the *sangtins* assume no such shared experience: their collectively crafted individual stories are shaped through painful dialogue” (xiii). Indeed, as the *sangtins* reflect, “it is extremely difficult for all of us to challenge one another on the question of caste difference to this day” (83). As the *sangtins* make clear, central to these intra-group negotiations of social difference are the varying levels of social power present within the group, whether in terms of geopolitical, class, sexual, linguistic, educational, or religious privilege, to name a few. Dialogue, rather than represented as an uninhibited exchange of ideas, is reconceived as a fraught, fought for space.

These embodied definitions of what dialogue means in the context of social organizing importantly work to reimagine foundational organizing principles and put forth a more nuanced, cautious paradigm from which a more effective understanding of coalitional alliances can emerge. By attesting to the ways in which their groups organized around shared goals and outcomes rather than shared experience these texts put forth story-based dialogue—in a sustained, critical, and focused setting—as a methodology capable of productively working through social difference. This is one of the main reasons that the polyphonic structure works so well; rather than glossing over internal social difference, its structural formatting allows these differences to speak, recreating dialogues between speakers who occupy different positionalities.

This representational choice to embody/enact a commitment to dialogue is also evidenced by the inclusion and exclusion of certain social voices as each project handles class and geopolitical privilege differently. As stated, *Lionheart Gal* maintains a linguistic stratification that renders visible the class separation between the majority of working class members and the two middle class members of Sistren by differently narrating the accounts in Jamaican Creole and Standard English. The narratives of the Latina Feminist Group bespeak material differences specifically that of graduate student members versus full professors, concerning family backgrounds and professional trajectories, and yet the members of the group still choose to highlight their converging social positions as Latinas working within the U.S. academy. *Playing With Fire*, in its observance of the extreme power and experiential differences between the field workers the two Richas (one a U.S. professor, the other a one-time regional NGO coordinator), while collectively organized as the “Sangtin Writers,” choose to only incorporate the life stories of the seven field workers, arguing that the incorporation of the middle class experiences of the other two *sangtins* would take attention away from the social struggles experienced by the majority.

In *Walking on Fire*, Bell states her commitment to focusing on the life stories of poor and peasant Haitian women, but does still incorporate a select few middle class voices whose actions, she suggests, have signified a sustained political commitment to stand and struggle alongside those most marginalized. Bell’s incorporation of these voices performs an alternate pedagogical function, as each of the middle class narrators explicitly name how they come from socially privileged backgrounds and articulate a

defining moment in which they actively chose to align themselves with the political struggles of underclass Haitians. Given that Bell markets this book to a U.S. readership, these narratives of social privilege assume a meta-instructional quality on how readers can adapt a similar stance of political solidarity and utilize their privilege towards productive ends.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the notion of “privilege” is frequently rewritten as “responsibility.” As articulated by *griyo* Lise-Marie Dejean: “For me, power is a service. When I’m in power, I’m in a position that lets me serve the most people possible . . . I don’t conceive of power as a privilege. You yourself may be at the table, but you’re at the service of the people, you see. You’re educating people to let them participate in power” (216). This participatory framework articulated by Dejean is echoed by the middle class narrators throughout *Walking on Fire*, as is an insistence on a bidirectional understanding of solidarity. Says *griyo* Myrto Celestin Saurel, “our partners in power must make a special effort to listen to those who do not shout” (227).

As readers of polyvocal feminist testimonio, we are taught that an important piece of border crossing collaborations is for socially privileged collaborators to acknowledge their own responsibilities in entering into such a social contract. Reflects *sangtin* Richa Nagar, “The task of framing and translating this journey as one of its travelers—and also as the sole English speaker, academic, and nonresident Indian in the group—certainly comes with immense material and symbolic privileges. It also comes with huge responsibilities . . . to my collaborators, who have trusted me to narrate our journey for readers in worlds far removed from their own; and second, the responsibility to the

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<sup>58</sup> In *Walking on Fire* the *istwas* of *griyos* Yannick Etienne, Lelenne Gilles, Maries Josee St. Firmin, and Josette Perard, and Lise-Marie Dejean all perform this function.

readers who want to understand the processes, dilemmas, and challenges associated with our collaboration” (xxiv).

Acknowledging these responsibilities and intra-group social hierarchies, but not becoming paralyzed by them, marks the increasingly self-reflexive methodologies of contemporary polyvocal activist feminist testimonio and confronts the possibilities and foreclosures of differently positioned women working in coalitional alliance. As Chandra Mohanty and each texts’ polyvocal framework remind us, the naming of social difference in the context of social justice organizing works not so much to identify difference as difference, as it is to identify potential border crossings, social possibilities, and coalitional convergences. As the Latina Feminist Group reflects, whatever social differences exist between members of the collective, their project was nevertheless “framed by common political views about how to create knowledge and theory through [their] experiences” (8). These epistemological and methodological convergences serve to align them in a shared political vision, and to temporarily and situationally override individual social differences, even while they do not overcome them.

Indeed, in line with the simultaneous global/local resonance of testimonio, the texts work hard to remind readers that while the particularities of their project are context specific, their underlying methods are not. Beyond the documentation of a collective’s immediate intra-group dialogue then, the importance of dialogic process is also more generally emphasized within these texts as an integral component of social justice movements. For instance, in Lise-Marie Dejean’s “Minister of the Status and Rights of Women” she recounts how she came to be appointed Minister by President Aristide.

Specifically, Dejean remembers two demonstrations that occurred while she served that position: “While I was minister, there were two big demonstrations against the ministry. Some people couldn’t understand why that pleased me. But we don’t have the solution for everything; it’s normal that people question us . . . That demonstration gave me more strength to put pressure on” (161). Dejean’s ability to recognize the political dialogue that protests enable is evident in her alternate suggestion that, “If you want decentralized power, you must begin by sitting with people and listening to them. This let[s] us sharpen our programs to be in touch with the women and respond to their needs” (160). Dejean’s commitment to participatory democracy is clearly expressed in this statement and reinforces the broader political importance of dialogic interaction in social justice efforts.

As evidenced by the development of extensive methodology sections, polyvocal feminist testimonios remain committed to process-based and dialogic approaches to knowledge production. Insofar as the discursive representations of their labors bespeak a textual praxis, their detailed accounts of the labor processes and sustained dialogues undertaken throughout the production of the text perform a pedagogical function in reminding audiences that their theory and methods are intertwined. While process and dialogue form two quintessential tropes in contemporary polyvocal feminist testimonios, these works also employ more direct ways of interpellating the reader. These methods are closely explored in the next section.

*Interpellating the Reader in Feminist Activist Polyvocal Testimonios: Deliberative Methodologies and the Power of Direct Address*

“That’s why, activists of conscience, I would like you to help me shoulder this burden. Even though my body isn’t intact, I still carry this burden on my back. Those who would like to help us get out from under

this situation, look at me, a victim still standing on my own two feet. You who are not victims, you should lend a hand. Because many hands make the burden light.”

~Alerte Belance, “Get Up, Shake Your Bodies,” *Walking on Fire*

If the above section primarily illustrates how the methodology sections of polyvocal feminist activist testimonios provide a critical framework that make visible the extra-literary labor and dialogic processes that have created the final testimonio product, works such as *Walking on Fire*, *Playing With Fire*, *Lionheart Gal*, and *Telling to Live* further enhance their instructional value by giving explicit pedagogical directives that limit the interpretive power of the reader and teach them to read from an altered perspective, as defined by the work’s practitioners. To re-invoke Kimberly Nance, polyvocal feminist activist testimonio is a prime example of the “deliberative” strand of this writing form, “a literature of people who do not expect soon to be able to control official versions, and who are insistent and candid in acknowledging errors, contradiction, and dissent within their own ranks” (36). Indeed, the polyvocal format of feminist activist testimonio structurally “deliberates” on the epistemological possibility of co-existing truths. It insists on contradiction and utilizes this textual framework to signal its commitment to working through—rather than suppressing—social difference. This is especially true of polyvocal texts such as *Playing With Fire* whose collaborative approaches forthrightly attest to the existence of power inequities and conflict within group dynamics. These moments of dissent and ambivalence can also be channeled to affect the interpretive practices of the reading audience by paradoxically increasing the level of trust they have in truth claims put forth by the text, precisely by calling attention to the limits of their knowledge claims.

These narrative interruptions and moments of contemplation can be large and small. If the overall polyvocal structure signals the large-scale evidence of these deliberative methodologies, they can also be found at seemingly un-noteworthy moments. For instance, in *Telling to Live*'s "Silence Begins at Home," Patricia Zavella opens her narrative with an attempt to recreate her maternal lineage. Rather than presenting herself as one hundred percent clear on the genealogical picture she paints, she interrupts herself with, "I think. From my attempts to piece together my grandmother's story, I learned that she was one of fourteen children, with two sets of twins . . . Grandma does not want to tell any more about her history" (43, 44). This moment of narrative ambivalence, while calling attention to the limits of her own knowledge and the less than objective nature of historical memory, paradoxically marks the rest of what she says as more honest and trustworthy. That is, if she is willing to call attention to that which she does not know, so the reader reasons, she must be confident in the social information that she *does* present. This narrative digression performs an informal discussion between friends, more of a real-time discussion rather than closed text. These moments of contradiction, dissent, and confusion are not incorporated without purpose. If "deliberating" on the imperfect processes and collective tensions that mark their organizing initiatives also serve a pedagogical function in encouraging their readers to think more sharply about ways of working through social difference, then so do these small scale narrative maneuvers encourage readers to adapt more nuanced understandings of their world.

As Nance argues, the project of deliberative testimonio actively encourages the reader to call into question the assumed stability of their worldview and to more fully

realize the messy webs of entanglement between themselves and the lives at the center of the text: “Far from transparent or simplistic propaganda, the future orientation of deliberative testimonio requires a hybrid and much more sophisticated rhetorical strategy, one that will persuade readers to think critically about the world at the same time that it confronts them with a personal obligation to combat injustice” (Nance 38). In order to accomplish this, deliberative testimonios must groom their readers to make them feel comfortable enough to have their worldviews challenged. As Nance argues, the “rhetorical strategy is to get readers to accept a certain definition of themselves so that they will then feel obligated to live up to it” (Nance 59). As such, feminist activist polyvocal testimonios must actively *construct* their readerships if they are to successfully redirect their defensive disengagements and interpellate them as allies to their cause. In order to effectively construct their readers as allies, feminist testimonios must also *anticipate* and *direct* their responses towards empathetic readings of their works. This section articulates how they create and direct their readers-turned-allies by providing an overview of prominent rhetorical devices they utilize to successfully interpellate their readership as such.

The polyvocal activist testimonios I engage with accomplish this interpellation through sophisticated rhetorical devices that operate on two main levels. First, these works extend the pedagogical function of their methodology sections by incorporating instructional passages within life narratives themselves that model alternative modes of engagement and train the reader to read and see differently. This is often accomplished through the performance of analytical “walk-throughs” that model the interpretative

processes of decoding needed to successfully derive social meaning from the collection's life stories. Second, individual life narratives house a range of rhetorical devices that subtly—and sometimes explicitly—direct the reader's interpretive processes, most notably accomplished through various modes of direct address.

To varying degrees, these rhetorical devices utilize pathos—a focused deployment of emotion—in order to gain full access to the reader's analytical and emotional worlds. While stories necessarily utilize pathos as an integral part of their narrative structure, these collections push beyond the bounds of typical usage to directly address on what interpretive levels these narratives need be addressed by their readership. For instance, in *Lionheart Gal*, Ford-Smith states how the importance of the collection's story-based approach to social knowledge is that such a paradigm necessarily engages the imaginative capabilities of its readership, which in turn “evokes both thought and feeling” (xvi). Whereas abstract theory privileges analytical thought (i.e. disembodied) to the exclusion of emotion (i.e. embodied), the story-based theorizing that *Lionheart Gal* models refuses such a separation. By resisting this dichotomy, readers must “reason” with both head and heart.

In fact, the very language of “head and heart” is utilized by the Sangtin Writers to great effect. In one of the collection's distinctive interpretive codas, the *sangtins* state: “Along with the sharpening of our analytical abilities, we wish to open the doors of others' hearts in such a way that we all can find enough space to fight our battles against everyday social, physical, and emotional exploitation, so that the voices that have been suffocating for years can find the desired notes to sing and scream” (67). Beyond the

aesthetic force of this statement, the phrase “emotional exploitation” serves as a powerful reminder that oppression is multi-dimensional; that knowing the “facts” of a social situation does not constitute *understanding* it. Insofar as the *sangtins* state how their “only wish is to find the strength to end the restlessness caused by the half-shut boxes that are still hiding in [their] chests,” directly before this passage, the imagery of “half-shut boxes” serves as both invitation and challenge to their readership. That is, the dialogic function of this statement at once documents the challenge of emotionally confronting the oppressions the *sangtins* have faced (in this context in relation to adolescence, sexuality, and motherhood), and to simultaneously remind the reader that these are tales that cannot be interpreted through the mind alone. Rather, it is also necessary for readers to open their own “half-shut boxes” to fully experience the emotional power and social truths the *sangtins’* stories convey, and to more fully understand the multi-dimensionality of social oppression.

But lest readers surmise that this utilization of pathos is a thinly veiled attempt to “win them over,” the *sangtins* assure them that the simultaneity of the collective’s analytic and emotional labor is precisely what has marked the liberatory possibilities of their journey: “Whenever we have confronted this reality, we have acutely realized how difficult it has been to release ourselves from the values and fears that were instilled in us in the name of religion and purity. But our collective struggles with these messy questions have also loosened many knots in our heads and hearts” (89). Surely, the evoked image of knotted heads and hearts is one that “travels” fairly easily to signify the confusion and consequent emotional hardness that social circumstances can lead to. This

image is made all the more effective when immediately followed by the statement, “attempts are being made to fill our children’s brains with the same communal hatred and fears that were once stuffed into our brains” (89). The image of forceful inundation—of being the unknowing and unwilling recipient of social prejudice—especially when framed as a perpetual, intergenerational, and unceasing action, powerfully reiterates that if it is the “brain” that is responsible for perpetuating such social inequity, then clearly it is a matter of the “head and heart” in order to heal from and confront such oppression. It is through passages such as these, both explicit and implicit, that feminist activist polyvocal testimonios affectively gain access to their readers’ analytic and emotional worlds.

But if the emotional dimensions of reader responses are actively cultivated, they are also eased into. As suggested, in each of these texts, the methodology sections are not entirely un-academic. The analytical frameworks utilized by the methodology sections serve to put the reader at ease that the pathos-based life stories each collection houses are nonetheless authored by people of “sense.” By utilizing a framework rooted in rigid documentation of their methods and processes, statement of goals and intended audience(s), descriptions of the sociohistorical landscape and/or incorporation of statistics, and that serves as analytic commentary on following the stories and interviews, a balance of the objective/subjective is comfortably maintained. This maintained balance between the objective and subjective that makes it more possible the life narratives to be interpreted as social knowledge rather than as fictionalized accounts. It is fitting then, that the first rhetorical directives the readers encounter are housed within methodology

sections that perform a pedagogical walk through on the concepts and critical lenses needed in order to effectively engage with the text.

For example, in *Walking on Fire*, Beverly Bell devotes much time to providing working definitions of seemingly basic, but foundational terms used within the text such as “resistance,” “power,” and “solidarity.” These directives cue the reader to temporarily suspend their own understandings of these terms in order to engage with how these terms mean in the lives of the collection’s *griyos*. Bell’s discussion of “resistance” proves to be the most detailed and powerful. While the short-hand definition offered is “the negotiation of power by the weaker against the strong” (5), she soon follows this up to suggest how the “standard criteria are far too narrow to encapsulate the breadth of Haitian resistance” (5). As she extrapolates, “the definition of resistance is expanded to include any act that keeps the margins of power from being further encroached upon, even where the protagonist cannot expand those margins. Given the forces arrayed against a Haitian woman, simply to *kenbe la*, hold the line—even without making any advance—is a victory. If she does no more than maintain her resources and rights—in the face of attempts by other people, institutions, or systems to deny her them—then she practices resistance” (5).

In this short paragraph Bell succinctly contests and redirects standard understandings of large-scale resistance efforts and replaces them with an alternate, yet equally as powerful understanding of resistance in this specific context. Given the extremity of Haiti’s poverty and illiteracy rates, Bell suggests how survival itself can be a “purposeful act of defiance” (5). In so doing, Bell directs the reader to engage with the

narratives with a more nuanced eye, attuned to the reality that in this context “resistance is often subtle or imperceptible. It bubbles beneath the surface, outside obvious public domains. Even where the women appear to be quiescent or the margins of maneuverability to be completely constrained, they might be engaged in multilayered negotiations of power” (6). Bell is doing more than providing her working definition of “resistance.” She is literally giving the reader a crash course in understanding resistance efforts as seen from below. By rejecting text book definitions that require “resistance” to be of a certain notable scale to effectively qualify, while still employing recognizably academic language, she provides a realist perspective on the scale of daily tactical maneuvers employed by Haitian women to fight against furthered material and agential denial. Indeed, Bell’s discussion of resistance could easily translate to a nuanced understanding of what agency looks like in restrictive conditions<sup>59</sup>.

But Bell moves beyond the incorporation of detailed definitions to connect these concepts to actual circumstances as lived by the *griyos* within the book. In a subsection entitled “Daily Acts of Resistance” in the book’s first chapter, “Resistance in Survival,” Bell explicitly states how “[d]etecting the prevalence of dissent among Haitian women necessitates radically changing one’s perceptions of what resistance is and where to look

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<sup>59</sup>As a critic looking for examples of polyvocal feminist activist collaborative testimonios, I initially came to this text full of skepticism. On the cover page Bell—not the *griyos*—is listed as the author. Many of the interviews come from women she just met, and she decides to represent their ideas in English and market them to a U.S. reading audience. It was not until I came to this definition of resistance that my impression began to change. While her solely authored introduction certainly does not challenge the hierarchy of knowledge production, she does productively use her academic background to instruct her readership on how to differently encounter the Haitian women’s narrative outside of the “bare life” paradigm too often perpetuated by international accounts of the nation. This instructional posture attempts to convey resistance as seen through the eyes of the resisters and literally trains its readership how to look through their altered lens. Drawing upon the fact that her position as founder and director of the Center for Economic Justice in Albuquerque, New Mexico mark her a “credible source” for the US reading public she targets, she garners this intellectual/political trust in order to teach the book’s audience how to see and read outside of narrow U.S., first worldist paradigms.

for it” (25). Immediately following this claim, Bell performs a hypothetical initial physical impression of *griyo* Roselie Jean-Juste:

Her hand crippled by a beating from her husband, her face and carriage showing the strain of life on the run from him, at first glance Roselie seems broken. On the contrary. When she came to our meeting to give her narrative, Roselie had just left a human rights advocate from whom she was seeking help. She also was engaged in complex self-protection strategies, including sleeping at a different house each night. And she was vehement about having her full story, including her husband’s name, told in this book so as to publicize the man’s brutality and pressure him to stop.

(25)

Bell’s framing of Roselie’s situation assumes a “Take this woman, here’s how you might read her situation, here’s what’s really going on” approach and performs a literal rereading that encourages readers to revisit their own initial assumptions and biases and to engage the collection’s *istwas* with a “widened gaze” (25).

It is not that Bell attempts to “assign” agency to situations in which it is not there. Rather, a stated goal of the collection is to “demonstrate that there is no *absolute* line between power and powerlessness. How women challenge their constraints, or amass strength and resources *within* those constraints is the focus” (8). Without downplaying the complexity of the social context or the dire material conditions in which the women find themselves, Bell nevertheless aims at highlighting the determination and social consciousness of the women within these conditions. In *Lionheart Gal*, its depiction of

the social landscape of working class black Jamaican women performs a similar function. The narratives are certainly not attuned to bourgeois notions of what defines feminist consciousness, rather they provide richly detailed accounts of the social circumstances working class Jamaican women are up against even with a cultivated critical consciousness, and how they negotiate systems of power in their daily lives.

The analytical walk-through undertaken by Bell is similarly performed by Ford-Smith in *Lionheart Gal*. In the introduction to the collection, Ford-Smith provides the formative directive that “these tales demand to be decoded” since the process of decoding “creates a situation in which the awareness of social contradictions is sharpened” (xvi). Drawing upon the image of Nanny of the maroons, Ford-Smith uses the example to suggest how the folktale about her “bouncing bullets off her bottom” signifies on two simultaneous levels: it literally documents an event that might have happened, and it conveys a more far reaching symbolism about the strength of Jamaican women (xvi). As such, Ford-Smith directs the reader to understand how “these stories are invaluable in the effort to change the effect of oppressive forces on [their] lives” (xvi). From here, Ford-Smith enacts a series of critical decodings in which she walks the readers through individual narrative accounts and names their thematic importance. In so doing, she reiterates how these accounts that document situations of unemployment, intimate partner violence, and teen pregnancy are always about more than the literal plot; these microsocial events simultaneously correspond with larger macrosocial forces of gender inequity, globalization, migration, and the education system. The very narrative structure of Ford-Smith’s walk-through illustrates this in her ability to fluidly interweave social

analysis with discussions of how this is evidenced within specific narrative accounts, in turn modeling a process of decoding attuned to multiple registers of meaning making.

In contrast to how *Lionheart Gal* provides an initial interpretive framework and then sends readers off on their own, *Playing With Fire* continues to provide collectively generated interpretations throughout the collection.<sup>60</sup> *Playing With Fire* does not provide these analytical walk-throughs within its methodology sections, choosing instead to intermittently perform these processes of decoding for its readers within the main body of the text. This is accomplished through interpretive codas that serve to reflect on what and how individual narratives mean when juxtaposed with each other. For instance, the chapter “From the Streets of Babul to the Wetness of *Aanchal*,” is concerned with the themes of adolescence, marriage, and motherhood and consists of interlocking snippets of each woman’s narrative. Once all of the seven voices have spoken, a comparative analysis provides an overarching interpretation of the collective stories as achieved through the *sangtins*’ dialogic processes: “The families of Garima, Sandhya, Shikha, and Pallavi were economically more secure and resourceful than were Radha’s and Chaandni’s parents. For this reason, the sorrows that fell into the laps of these four women involved fewer pains of livelihood and hunger and more aches of middle-class respectability and caste-based social status” (48). Through these interpretive codas the *sangtins* take control of how their stories will be received, interrupting the reader’s consumption of their stories with evidence of how the collective has already thoroughly processed these accounts for themselves.

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<sup>60</sup> Perhaps because of the relative privilege of its contributors and possible assumptions of who will read the text, *Telling to Live* places more emphasis on explaining their methodology and theory behind their collection of life narratives than directing the reader through decoding processes.

But if these examples illustrate how feminist activist polyvocal testimonios guide reader interpretation through overtly pedagogical methods of direct address, they do not account for the subtle, often imperceptible, ways they do so within the narrative frame. One of the most powerful ways this is accomplished is through a more traditional usage of direct address, in which the narrative voice speaks directly to the reading audience, addressing them as trusted recipient of their testimonies. This narrative device serves to make the reader feel visible—and thus accountable—to the social information they are receiving. No longer anonymous, the reader is literally hailed into being within these moments of address. Two of the most prominent forms of direct address within feminist activist polyvocal testimonio are accounts of “purposeful storytelling,” and the utilization of questions posed to the reader.

If the editors of these collections break with the self-enclosed world of the narrative frame in order to pedagogically instruct readers of the social function of these tales, then certainly too do the narrators. For instance, in “Chaleron’s Lesson” in *Walking on Fire*, Gracita Osias discusses the social power of literacy and documents her role in peasant literacy initiatives. Within her *istwa* she reinforces the social power of literacy by recounting how the combination of illiteracy and falsified legal documents led her family to lose their own land (85). Before initiating this personal tale, however, the *griyo* forthrightly states the purpose of the account to the reader: “Okay, this is a short story of my family history. I tell you this story to show you the importance of knowing how to read and write” (85). Through this instance of direct address, Osias claims for her self a moment of purposeful storytelling; a personal narrative that demonstrates a larger

social truth. By breaking with the self-sealed narrative frame, Osias piques the interest of the reader and reinforces her cognizance of speaking *to* an audience. Through the “I tell you this story because” model, Osias also claims power over what readers take from her family account.

While this offhanded, informal phrasing might seem to denote the narrative’s apparent artlessness, it in fact marks quite the opposite. By incorporating a dialogic, oral framing into the text Osias and Bell frame the reader as a friend, trusted with this privileged personal information. The narrators in *Lionheart Gal* utilize similar methods of informal address to assert their knowledge claims. Often, the oral quality of address serves to “soften the blow” of incisive social critique. For instance in “Red Ibo,” the narrator delivers a critical reading of the social dynamics of her childhood school: “Come to think of it, a lot of it had to do with race issues, like the time with this white Scottish math and science teacher who everyone—even the white girls—hated because she was prejudiced not only against everything black but against everything Jamaican. Why she came here to teach I’ll never know. Maybe she just wanted some sun . . . Anyway, this middle class black girl Heather asked her a question in class . . .” (224-225). The narrator’s employment of ambivalent, indecisive phrases—“come to think of it,” “maybe,” “anyway”—reframe the content of her critique of Jamaica’s racialized class system into a series of unrefined, or in-process, reflections. Without these qualifiers, however, the sense of ambivalence is replaced with evidence of a sharp critical eye, reinforcing how these insights are delivered with purpose indeed.

All of these polyvocal feminist testimonios utilize the trope of purposeful storytelling to good effect. In “Get Up, Shake Your Bodies,” Alerte Belance extends the function of purposeful storytelling by directly articulating how she hopes her story will affect the reader: “I would like people who are reading this to put Haiti in their consciences. It deserves to have the rule of law and democracy, so that the children of Haiti can speak, the children of Haiti can work, the children of Haiti can go to school and know how to read” (233). Belance’s purpose of contributing to the collection is voiced as a series of legitimate—reasonable even—concerns: a stable government, employment opportunities, an educational system available to all. Belance’s particular focus on “the children” is also not accidental; if the failed attempts of adult Haitian leaders to bring prosperity to their nation raise suspicion in the minds of uncommitted readers, then surely the innocents are still worthy of a better future. This reassurance of innocence is another recurring trope of deliberative testimonio (Nance 75).

Belance extends this utilization of pathos a few paragraphs down:

That’s why, activists of conscience, I would like you to help me shoulder this burden. Even though my body isn’t intact, I still carry this burden on my back. God let me live so I could lay this burden at the feet of activists and concerned citizens. Come help me and the others so we can see our way free of the biggest country that has put its foot on our neck and is squeezing us. That’s why I give you this message—see if you can help carry the burden on Haiti’s back . . . Those who would like to help us get out from under this situation, look at me, a victim still standing on my own

two feet. You who are not victims, you should lend a hand. Because many hands make the burden light. (233)

It is no secret that this passage is laden with strategic rhetorical maneuvers, and nor is it incidental that Balance's narrative is the very last of the collection, coming even after Bell's own closing remarks. From hailing the readers as "activists of conscience" and "concerned citizens" to the evocation of the Christian God, to referring to herself as a victim, to closing with the adage that "many hands make the burden light," this passage is brimming with a focused utilization of pathos. Even the phrase "that's why I give you this message" evidences a messianic quality that makes it hard to turn away from Balance's demands (couched within this language as desires) without feeling that you are letting her, and the children of Haiti, down. If this serves as a more concentrated, explicit utilization of pathos-laden direct address in the form of purpose storytelling, it nevertheless calls attention to the myriad of forms and idioms polyvocal activist testimonios utilize throughout their narratives.

Another narrative form of direct address employed by polyvocal activist testimonios is the rhetorical deployment of questions posed to the reader. For instance, in *Playing With Fire* the *sangtins* often interrupt the narrative by posing several questions to the reader: "What are we trying to tell you, our readers, by engaging in this exercise of writing? Are these stories important simply because they were articulated as a result of a collective process?" (61). As highlighted by Nance, the use of ambivalence within the narrative frame is an established trope of deliberative testimonio (35). These might indeed be central questions that the collective has grappled with, but their inclusion in the

text marks them as a purposeful rhetorical device that forces the reader to grapple with these very same questions. In so doing, the theoretical, interpretive, and ethical questions the collective has confronted throughout the process become dialogically extended to the reader. This not only makes the behind-the-scenes labors more apparent, it also challenges the reader's passive reading of their work. The above questions, while addressed from the position of the authors—"What are we trying to achieve? What is significant about our stories?"—can in turn raise questions for the reader as recipient of their efforts, "Why am I reading these? What am I taking from these stories?"

The other collections similarly employ direct address in the form of questions posed to the reader. For instance, *Lionheart Gal's* "Veteran by Veteran," where the narrative voice provides an extended analysis of the Jamaican working class landscape, ends with: "Yuh see how it go? After yuh get nice lickle house and a live up and plenty people all plant up dem garden, dem start up dem war. Is like politicians no waan working class people fi live good for when dem have dem political differences is always inna di working class area dem fight it out" (170), and disarming defensive modes of engagement. By posing the offhanded, informal question, "yuh see how it go?" the reader is once again positioned as privileged friend, capable of understanding and empathizing with the social critique that immediately follows.

*Lionheart Gal's* "Red Ibo" even employs the rhetorical deployment of question a step further: "You see how subtly class assumptions crept into the content of my own rebellion? I didn't analyse it that way then" (225). By directly addressing the reader and asking if they are maintaining a critical eye, through the statement, "I didn't analyze it

that way then,” the narrator reinforces how this critical eye is learned through practice. In *Telling to Live*’s “You Speak Spanish Because You Are Jewish?” Rina Benmayor chooses to frame her entire narrative with a question-mark (55). While this rhetorical framing serves to pique reader interest through its evocation of seemingly incongruent language and ethnicity, Benmayor cleverly utilizes the device to claim for herself the space to answer the suspicions she has always experienced regarding the complexity of her identity as a Sephardic Jew.

In breaking with the internal logic of the narrative frame, the practitioners of feminist activist polyvocal testimonio at once call attention to its artifice and exploit their authorial transgressions in an effort to grab the emotional and ethical attention of their readerships. In fact, they all use direct address as a way of calling attention to how they maintain a level of interpretive control over how their works are received by only sharing with the readers what they consider beneficial to include for the accomplishment of their goals. This trope of withholding information is one well-worn within the testimonio tradition, most memorably evidenced by Menchú’s insistence that she chose to keep parts of her Indian identity a “secret.” In *Playing With Fire*, this selective “withholding” is alternately evidenced by the translations of the *sangtins*’ journal entries into a rewritten third-person narrative account, a mediated textual form that reminds the reader that they do not have direct access to the collective’s internal discussions. Similarly, in *Walking on Fire*, Bell frames the narratives with the assertion that “[t]his collection represents only a fraction of the strategies employed on a daily basis. Others have been omitted, at the hushed warning of the book’s collaborators so as to remain effective” (7).

Perhaps more so than any other example of each work's deliberative methodologies or utilizations of direct address, these tropes work to highlight Nance's claim that the construction of the reader as intimate friend and potential ally, in deliberative testimonio is itself a rhetorical device. While addressed as confidante in other narrative moments, these passages addressing the project/collective's selective withholdings work to keep the reader at a safe distance and call attention to the practitioners as political savvy agents capable of molding the textual representations of their stories to direct readers towards empathetic interpretations of their work. As Nance suggests, "the practice of testimonial speakers should be of as much interest to social science researchers as to analysts of testimonio. Such resemblances confirm what a recognition of empirical expertise would suggest—deliberative testimonio's speakers seem to know what they are doing" (94).

*'Collective Journeys of Creation': Testimonio as Solidarity*

"Our work is not the work of a year, it is the work of a lifetime."

~Honor Ford-Smith, "The Journal of a Theatre Collective: Drama for Struggle and Research"

"[T]his collective journey of creation has united us in a closed fist. We hope that this fist will continue to become stronger and that we will gain the support and strength of many, many fists like ours. Only then will we be able to create a world in which small groups like ours have the heart to dream big dreams with ordinary people for their happiness—on our own terms, by the force of our own thoughts, and in our own languages."

~Sangtin Writers, *Playing With Fire*

If the combined purposeful deployments of polyvocality, extended process-based methodology sections, and modes of direct address provide an overarching interpretive road map to steer readers towards empathetic and nuanced understandings of their works, then each collection's articulations of their immediate and far reaching modes of

intervention make explicit their use of testimonio as a methodological intervention to further feminist social justice efforts.

While traditional understandings of testimonio have operated within a top-down model of power relations, feminist activist polyvocal testimonios claim for themselves a much more dynamic understanding of power relations. For instance, in *Walking on Fire*, Bell paints a bidirectional picture of what solidarity means: “solidarity . . . contributes to a mutual conversion. It has a boomerang effect: In collaborating with Haitians as they fight detrimental U.S. policies and influence in Haiti, Americans can also shift power within the United States. Through working for more just foreign policy toward Haiti, we are also building democracy and accountability at home” (232). If this statement at once opens the possibility of readers becoming more aware of global interdependencies and serves to bait readers by considering their own inherited benefits from solidarity efforts, she does not stop there. She continues, “[l]ess acknowledged, but vividly real, is what Haitians have to offer us. Haitian women—and more generally, the Haitian people—can teach and inspire us with new concepts and models for our own struggles for fully participatory democracy and the enrichment of humanity” (232).

More than a simplistic “they can offer us things too,” and beyond the limiting us/them paradigm she puts forth, Bell reinforces the multiple audiences *for* and the simultaneous global/local resonance *of* feminist testimonio projects. The *griyos* deliver their stories not just to highlight their particular social problems, but also to highlight how they are creating solutions through informal, daily negotiations as well as through formal, social justice efforts. More still, their stories and ideas hold out the possibility of

“sparking” ideas and inspiring other organizers situated in different contexts. Indeed, while the Sangtin Writers’ *Sangtin Yatra* was meant to primarily benefit and spark passion in more localized networks of activists, the translation served to mobilize a broader network with activists not literate in Hindi (xxiii).

At the very least, these works maintain a hopeful view of the emerging possibilities solidarity efforts enable. In *griyo Kesta Occident*’s “A Stubborn Hope,” she poses the question, “how can we help build these bridges of solidarity all over the world? How are we going to pull ourselves together to create that alternative?” (228). Then answering her own question, suggests, “[a] collective international conscience is developing more than before. Our labor unions are meeting with labor unions from other countries. Haitian peasants are meeting with Latin American peasants . . . What a beacon of hope!” More often though, these works deliver complex models of coalitional feminist organizing initiatives attuned to a complex of difference in which inherited social hierarchies are creatively re-explored and re-worked so that all members of the project are respected for their particular skill and knowledge sets. Indeed, through their dialogic methodologies, all members are invited to be both teachers and learners, listeners and tellers, processes which are in turn artfully inscribed to at once embody and convey their story-based praxis through innovative narrative, structural, and rhetorical strategies.

Despite the diverse forms and functions of these polyvocal feminist texts, Honor Ford-Smith aptly states the shared testimonial ethos that connects these works: “The women who speak in these stories are not unique . . . Their lives here show that women are actively creating solutions, that they are not passively awaiting outside agitators to

‘stir them up’ into action” (xxx). More so than “reaching” socially privileged audiences, these works actively claim story-based models of memory and dream work as important modes of critical praxis. They employ testimonio as a methodology for organizing and present themselves as partial blueprints for social action. In so doing, each text offers itself up in the spirit of coalitional alliance, with the hope that their contributions will spark in others the desire to add to a conceptual and story-based mapping of existing social conditions in all of their gendered dimensions and forcefully insert themselves in the fraught terrain of social knowledge production.

#### ***Section Four: Beyond the Documentary: Testifying to the Politics of the Imagined***

“Bombarded by another’s language and culture, we play out our resistance to the siege, fighting in vain against the artillery of reality with phrases as our only weapons.” ~Nora Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death*

“Literature should not be charged with the awesome burden of chastising readers into guilt and burdensome recollections. Neither should literature completely neglect the testimonial voice of the times. Braiding these daunting tasks, *Steps Under Water* succeeds in leading us into a world that too many have unjustly known and that many more pretend to ignore.” ~Saúl Sosnowski, “Of Memory’s Literary Sites”

In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Edward Said suggests that while the arts and humanities have no obligation to solve the world’s problems, they nevertheless comprise a critical component of social justice projects for the critical perspectives and imaginative visions they provide (53). Feminist literary testimonios seem to understand themselves in a parallel fashion. If activist testimonios utilize the writing form to stage political interventions, literary testimonios perform more politically philosophical reflections that come to bear on pressing social issues, including the uses of historical memory, the social function of writing, and the ability of language to convey traumatic circumstance. While some works recognizably ride the line between the literary and the documentary as established in traditional testimonio, others indulge in a more fictional

realm, often choosing to employ the writing form to bring light to narratives and experiences that continue to be marginalized even within traditional testimonial projects.

This section is centrally concerned with how and why actual historical events become translated into the world of fiction, and what opportunities this affords. As this section will illustrate, the imaginative uses of testimonio vary greatly in purpose and form. And yet, I argue that these fictional deployments collectively capitalize on the increasing cultural currency and recognition of testimonio by applying a testimonial narrative framework to works that do not otherwise conform to traditional conceptions of what constitutes this writing project. While many literary testimonios directly draw upon oral histories and interviews to produce an imaginative text, others either more loosely interpret what little exists in historical archives, create stories within a testimonial framework that imagine how else life could be, or engage with social discourses that are not typically explored in more historicized and situational-based deployments of testimonio. The effect is a more exploratory—or deliberative, in Nance's terms—than functionary engagement with key theoretical and political questions with which testimonio is well-suited to intervene.

Rather than intervening in social events for the purpose of solving them, I argue that the testimonial narrative framework self-consciously adapted by feminist literary accounts is more often utilized to raise questions and to prompt in-depth reflection on sanctioned social situations. Although accomplished through different means than in activist testimonios, most feminist literary testimonios continue to uphold a polyvocal framework through their experimentation with narrative point of view and fragmented

narrational practices. Such practices seek to open conceptual doors to reassess how historical events have been conceived, and to prompt readers to consider new ways of being in the world through modeling alternate modes of dialogic relation.

My own interest in literary testimonios is rooted in a question that in many ways brought me to this project in the first place. Though I had always focused on fictional literature, circumstances in my personal and professional life began to make me reconsider why one would write fiction at all when “real” life is so complex. After studying literature and mainly reading fiction for several years, this question began to play over in my mind as I began to teach more first-person non-fiction in my gender studies and composition courses. The death of my father also coincided with this shift, making fiction seem superfluous at best. I consequently became more politicized than I had ever been, and began working at an afterschool program in a community center that serviced a large Somali refugee population. These children had stories to tell; stories of vibrancy and of life before their arrival in a small Vermont city, but also stories of pain and trauma, of seeing grandparents’ bodies piled on top of countless others in exposed, mass graves. And yet, too often, I watched how these children were instructed by the staff not to tell their stories in order to avoid “scaring” the other children. Again, I thought, why write fiction at all when these children’s life stories need to be told?

For a time, I thought fiction and I had parted ways. This gap further widened when I entered into a doctoral program with a strong social science focus, which made fiction seem even more circumspect. What, exactly, does fiction *do*, I wondered. How does it act on the world? And yet, as I took courses in History and Public Policy, I began

to notice how the role of narrative remained front and center in any and everything we discussed: an interest in how people narrate their experiences, how official and unofficial histories narrate and counter narrate events. Narration was everywhere, all around me, all the time. When I stumbled upon my first testimonios, then, they seemed to provide the structural “answer” I was looking for. Testimonio seemed to build upon this trend through its production of creatively shaped stories that referred outwardly to actual life events. While I noticed that they intentionally resided at the nexus of the discursive and the material, at the time I interpreted it as an acknowledgement of the limits of art in social justice projects, and of privileging the documentary, rather than how I now see it: as a definitive assertion of art as an integral component of such projects.

And yet, even as I fell into an initial infatuation with the “realness” of testimonio proper and its explicit pedagogical intent to bring attention to actual social situations, the questions kept nagging me: Why write fiction at all when the real world is so complex? What exactly does fiction, *do*? How does it act on the world? As a teacher, when illustrating how genre conventions affect what can be told—how and why—I often prompt my students to consider what graphic novels, animated films, and other creative representations can achieve that non-fiction accounts cannot when commenting on controversial social issues. I have undergone a similar interpretive process in working to unlearn my understanding of testimonio as privileging the documentary, and in considering the function and rationale behind literary forms of feminist testimonio. Within this section I propose that the increasing utilization of testimonio as a narrative

framework in literary, and in some instances, fictional works, provides a response to this question and a rethinking of testimonio's very relationship to the documentary.

I maintain that it is the adaptation of the testimonial framework—rather than the substance of a given text—that provides its social force to the literary strand of this writing project. Given that the testimonial has gained more circulation and legibility in recent years, I argue that readers are now better positioned to recognize the ethical component that accompanies this writing form, thereby grooming them to engage with testimonial rhetoric in terms of a reciprocal social pact rather than as a unidirectional form of entertainment. Recent feminist literary testimonios build upon this cultural legibility and exploit this rhetorical appeal to good effect in a way that allows them to find increasing functions and expressions for this writing project. Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, and Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* are two cases in point that utilize a testimonial frame to immediately alter readers' terms of engagement with their thematic explorations, but that otherwise resist conforming to the structure of traditional testimonio.

Most broadly, these feminist polyvocal literary testimonios collectively testify to how the rhetorical scaffolding of testimonio-proper is now productively applied to an increasing range of social justice projects, especially when contemplating political questions that fall beyond the scope of the documentary. Such a suggestion no doubt brushes up against continued concerns over the boundary lines of testimonio, and directly challenges any rigid genre-laden interpretation of this writing project. Indeed, the texts I work with in this section can no doubt be used as evidence of the genre's depoliticization

in their deviance from the recognizable forms and scripts associated with this writing form. While there is no doubt validity in continued attempts to negotiate what defines testimonio if not by certain identifiable characteristics, these are not the questions that preoccupy my work in this chapter. Rather, given my commitment to reframing testimonio as an expansive political ethos rather than as a pre-defined genre, I understand the application of the testimonial narrative framework to structurally and thematically experimental feminist literary works as evidence of its continued political relevance and its ability to lend itself to a variety of social justice projects. This section specifically explores such work undertaken by feminist literary testimonios through the representational examples of Nora Strejilevich's *A Single, Numberless Death*, Alicia Kozameh's *Steps Under Water*, and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*.

Originally published in Spanish as *Una Sola Muerte Numerosa* in 1997, and later translated into English in 2002, Nora Strejilevich's *A Single, Numberless Death* is an intertextual exercise in collective memory work, in which the author utilizes the narrative to counter official Argentinean legal reparation proceedings that define the Dirty War as an occasion of national trauma confined to the past. Rather than recounting events that occurred during the Dirty War, Strejilevich frames the testimonio to primarily reflect on its psychological aftermath as explored through the daily lives of Argentines, and to illustrate how the nation's unsettling past continues to haunt its present.

While the poetic wording and format call attention to the literariness of the narrative, so too does Strejilevich's language evoke a tension-ridden tone and immediacy that fundamentally alters how readers approach the text. Strejilevich follows the

narrative with a brief glossary of terms and groups that she has cited throughout the narrative, including CONADEP (National Commission on Disappeared Persons) and Madres de Plaza de Mayo, in addition to a list of sources she has used to comprise the narrative, including the Center for Legal and Social Studies, the Association of Former Detained-Disappeared, and CONADEP (176). In addition to externally framing her narrative with such documentary-based and archival materials, Strejilevich constantly disrupts a strictly literary flow of her narrative by including fragments of these materials within the body of the narrative itself. Strejilevich juxtaposes legally documented testimony from *Nunca Más* (the Argentinean equivalent of the South African truth commissions), quotations from former military officials, and official statements made by CONADEP and other organizations formed to document stories of the disappeared, all in addition to quotes taken from interviews Strejilevich conducted, as well as her personal letters and poems. As a result, Strejilevich's narrative confounds any simple categorization, weaving a complex narrative out of myriad parts.

In comparison to Strejilevich's intertextual account, Alicia Kozameh's testimonio *Steps Under Water*, which is also on the topic of the Argentinean Dirty War, is more ostensibly literary in scope in that it does not include appendices and historical documentation. Less concerned with confronting large-scale national amnesia through innovative narrative practices than Strejilevich's work, perhaps, Kozameh crafts carefully framed metanarratives that are preoccupied with the relationship between writing and trauma, and the role of art and literature in social justice projects. The narrative is specifically organized around the perspective of the narrator, Sara, and of her gradual

reincorporation into civil society, as it reflects on the challenges she confronts in adjusting to daily life outside of prison.

Similar to the Strejilevich, Kozameh's narrative maintains a fundamentally dialogic component throughout, with each chapter taking on a slightly different structural form. While the opening and closing chapters, both entitled, "A Way Back" are rooted in Sara's internal cognitive processes of coming to terms with her release and the contradictions of such "freedom," the intermediary chapters include situational-based dialogue, epistolary exchange and diary writing, a multi-voiced chapter documenting a complicated love triangle as narrated from the differing perspectives of all those involved, and even an extended response to the question, "Sara, What Does a Jacket Mean to You?" (which is also the chapter title). Through these diverse narrational practices, we glean not only an intimate perspective on the struggles faced by the formerly imprisoned when picking up the pieces of their lives, but also an intimate look at the tender, yet powerful bonds experienced between *compañeras*; relationships that while forged through situational circumstance, continue to thrive beyond prison walls.

Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* moves us not only from Argentina to Trinidad, but also from more recognizable forms of testimonio to the self-conscious evocation of testimonio in the fictional realm. If *Steps Under Water* and *A Single, Numberless Death* specifically dramatize the psychological effects of macro-level state-induced trauma on the formerly imprisoned, then *Cereus Blooms at Night* takes the writing form to a micro-level in its dramatization of the long-lasting effects of childhood sexual abuse as experienced by the elderly protagonist, Mala Ramchandin. As the

narrative unfolds, we come to know of Mala's continual molestation by her father, and how she willingly became the target of her father's sexual abuse in order to protect her younger sister, Asha, a figure who continues to pervade her consciousness as an old woman despite years of non-contact.

Importantly, Mala's story is filtered through the narrative perspective of Tyler, a gender queer nurse whose own personal growth is catalyzed through his relationship with her. This mediated narration reflects a post-positivist realist perspective that calls attention to how any narrative account is rooted in the socially situated perspective of its teller. Insofar as Mala's story could not be told without Tyler's help, and Tyler only begins to grow when he opens himself up to Mala, Mootoo's narrative identifies self-consciously cultivated interdependency as a potentially transformative part of human relations. With the particularities of Tyler and Mala's individual stories placed in tension with the backdrop of colonialism, Mootoo's narrative works to craft "a different collective memory, an oppositional community consciousness to resist the rigid mores and violent rationalities of empire, heteronormativity, and sexual domination" through a focus on interpersonal relations (May 114b).

Even when rooted in specific historical events, the imaginary component of literary testimonios allows them more creative license in how they choose to write on their chosen social issues. For instance, the foreword to *A Single, Numberless Death*, whose textual make up is marked by its intertextual inclusion of interview, legal proceeding, diary writing, and journalism, suggests that the "text is both fictional and documentary. It is fictional in that it attempts to tell a story that is not that of a specific

historical individual but rather that of individuals who are figures of an entire national social and political experience. It is documentary in that it is driven by specifically systematized information . . . about the ordeal of those who actually became victims of state terrorism” (x). *Steps Under Water* similarly self-consciously pushes the boundaries of history and fiction, with its cover identifying it as “a novel,” and Kozameh subsequently counter-balancing the weight of this fictional qualifier by suggesting that the “substance of the story, of every episode, is real” (xvi). Should one argue that fictionalizing an account neutralizes its political bite, Kozameh’s experience contests such a claim. Following publication of the novel *Steps Under Water*, members of the Buenos Aires police threatened her (xvii).

While works steeped in historical events such as *Steps Under Water* and *A Single, Numberless Death* work to challenge the documentary-based impetus of testimonio through their extended engagement with the psychological and historical aftermath of Argentina’s Dirty War, more straight forward fictional texts such as *Cereus Blooms at Night* call attention to *how else* the testimonial is being utilized, particularly as a means of addressing social issues that remain marginalized even within marginal experience narratives. Mootoo’s choice to employ a testimonial framework for a narrative centrally concerned with marginalized sexual discourses highlights how such modes of rhetorical address carry interpretive power regardless of how their subject matter might deviate from reader expectations.

Aside from its testimonial framework, this fictional work fully embraces the power of the imaginary to comment on relevant social issues, even following a common

trope of Caribbean literature in which thinly disguised mythic islands are utilized to comment on actual social situations in actual places. Specifically, *Cereus Blooms at Night* takes place on the fictionalized Trinidadian island of Lantanacamara, a narrative maneuver that allows Mootoo creative license to imagine a colonized space not rigidly confined by the actual geopolitical site and history of Trinidad, while simultaneously remaining historically grounded and geographically framed by references to Canada, Africa, and India. The intergenerational accounts of the two main characters, Mala and Tyler, are told with the “Shivering Northern Wetlands” (the fictionalized colonial power of England) as a persistent backdrop. This fictional posturing at once recognizes the continued effects of the colonial encounter in people’s daily lives while refusing to remain within its terms, and therefore allows readers room to “remember identities and histories differently” from historical colonial and nationalist accounts (May 107a).

While my chosen set of literary testimonios employ widely varied representational practices and subject matter, and in addition to their collective utilization of a testimonial framework for pedagogical effect, certain thematic overlaps and tropes remain. This section works to identify some of these central overlaps, as well as to articulate the political possibilities that their more innovative representational practices engender. Chapter Eight explores how the activity of creative memory work becomes utilized as a trope within literary testimonio, becoming its own meta-discourse on the importance of such representational efforts for contesting dominant social narratives. These continual deliberations on the role of art in social justice projects within the narrative frame importantly confront and contest discourses that narrowly assess the

pedagogical success of the writing form in terms of quantitative outcome. It goes on to explore how authors structurally experiment with temporal narrative disruption in order to comment on how the psychological aftermath of trauma continues to bear on the present, and to develop an understanding of how these long-term effects can be just as unsettling as the physical instances of torture that produced them. Chapter Nine is concerned with the focus that feminist literary testimonios place on “small-scale resistance,” and with the creative forms of communication that survivors of trauma utilize to guard against psychological isolation in dehumanizing conditions. The second half of this chapter is interested in feminist literary testimonios’ investment in alternative kinship and relationship formations, and how polyvocal representational methods are utilized to comment on the political and social productivity of positive social interdependence, especially in regards to producing more accurate social knowledge.

### **Chapter Eight: Writing the Aftermath: Beyond Torture, Memorializing the Act of Remembering**

“Now it’s my turn to take the stand in a more civilized way: sitting in front of a typewriter.”

~Nora Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death*

There has been recent interest in considering the ideological function of testimonio when the text outlives the social situation it addresses. If the point of testimonio is to call attention to an urgent social problem and that situation is resolved, it is asked, does the testimonio no longer have a purpose? Recent feminist literary testimonios have responded by claiming creative memory work as a valuable way of resisting historical amnesia, and more generally identifying the production of art as a vital method for keeping hope alive in dehumanizing conditions. In other words, the very *act*

of memory is configured as an act of posterity. These assertions are incorporated both thematically and figuratively within the narrative frame, at times the subject of discussion between characters, at other moments evoked through poetic monologue.

The role of art in confronting an array of oppressive social structure remains a constant trope in literary testimonio. In the context of Argentinean testimonios, the mere existence of these texts suggests that the authors felt compelled to represent the experiences of themselves and their fellow political prisoners. And yet, the struggle to justify literature as a productive response to these instances of torture is continually grappled with. At times, it is reflected through the narrator's (and we can assume author's) own conflicted views on its efficacy: does it really make a difference after all? For instance, in Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School*, the narrator berates herself for reciting poetry before explaining the "rules" of survival to a new arrival: "Instead of reciting poems I should have explained to the new prisoners . . . I should have told them that at the Little School we are beaten whenever our blindfolds are loose" (106). Similarly, Kozameh's narrator continually trivializes the "little lies" she constructs in order to keep herself and the other women prisoners going. At one point, she questions the use value of trying to record her experience at all: "What I'm doing just isn't working, trying to describe a moment of that magnitude. Almost absurd. Possible, but absurd. And let this be a sterile clarification: I believe in the word. Fervently . . . there's no recourse other than words that are heard, read. Images or no images, always the word" (143). Despite her "fervent" belief in the power of language and narrative, this passage reflects how Kozameh herself seems to falter in her belief of her own writing project.

While such doubts seem to respond to literary critics' suspicion over the genre's political potential, whether they are symptomatic of or critical of such suspicion is open to debate. With Partnoy publishing *The Little School* in 1986, and Kozameh publishing *Steps Under Water* in 1987, the nearness of the loss and despair resulting from the national trauma inflicted by the dictatorship almost necessitates such skepticism. Compelled by the need to *tell* their stories, both authors remain unsure of what to expect as a result of their accounts being published. In contrast, Strejilevich's *A Single, Numberless Death*, published over a decade later in 1997, has a decidedly more confident and accomplished tone. Claiming the process of "[i]nterpretation as a counterpoint to silence" (152), Strejilevich's account has the benefit of seeing the publication of *Nunca Más* and witnessing the enactment of significant legal reparations.

Strejilevich's narrative continually critiques the insufficiency of such governmentally sanctioned programs to address the profound traumatic effects the dictatorship had on the country, and yet her ability to witness these changes renews her faith in the testimonio and more generally the ability of the masses to collectively respond to injustice. Although Strejilevich accounts for the initial suspicion former political prisoners faced in proving their experiences ("we came out of nowhere asking weird questions about a remote past that none of them can recall" (126)), so too does she move to a space of recognition whereby after having her testimony recorded in *Nunca Más*, her story becomes accepted and legitimated by a governmental official: "Giddy from the impact of abruptly finding such a fortuitous witness to corroborate my existence, I leave the office . . . Will my steps be audible as I exit?" (118).

Strejilevich's narrative harshly critiques the amount of time, energy, and pain the government has caused for those such as herself who have carried the burden of proving their existence, and her account clearly finds more hope in her invitation to speak at a ceremony that seeks to memorialize the atrocities that occurred at the "Athletic Club" (a name given to the five largest concentration camps during the dictatorship) than in legal reparations (173). Suggesting "[i]t's the birthday of our second skin, almost two decades old, and we celebrate it here, at the ruins of the Athletic Club," the ceremony literalizes testimonio's goal of bearing witness, of insisting on presence in the face of so much absence. Telling the crowd, "*Compañeros/ We've come here today/ to tell stories/ because they never could/ vanquish our memories*" (169), Strejilevich ends her narrative with a call to collective memory work, understood as "a chorus of voices resisting armed monologues that turned so much life into a single, numberless death" (171). Insisting that "No ceremonies [can] help [to] close those wounds," she claims such wounds stay open for posterity's sake: "[I]et mine remain wide open. Death and its turns. I build no monuments for you, but I carry you in my body, in my cells, in my feet" (144). In so doing, remembering itself becomes memorialized as an essential act of resistance. Even if it cannot offer healing it can at the very least offer a more profound sense of historical understanding.

Such textual examples highlight how feminist literary testimonios favor the act of memory work, and of discovering figurative means of its expression, over documenting specific instances of trauma. And yet, because intimately connected to the desire to write beyond instances of physical torture in feminist literary testimonio is the profound

inability to do so, feminist literary testimonios at times seek to give expression to the abject as a way to philosophically reflect on the very difficulty of such expression. As suggested by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain*, “[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language” (4). As she continues, because of this, a “great deal . . . is at stake in the attempt to invent linguistic structures that will reach and accommodate this area of experience normally so inaccessible to language” (6). Given the inexpressibility of pain, when experiences of torture are narrated in a text, figurative language is frequently utilized to develop alternative mechanisms for conveying such intensity of emotion and physical abjection, and to avoid a mere fetishization of pain. Thus, the silences and absences become just as important as what is present in the narrative structure.

One way that Strejilevich’s narrative attempts such an account is by focusing on the bodily sensations that accompany the electric shocks being enacted upon her skin during her imprisonment:

The voice is accompanied by a strange percussive that jolts my skin. It’s not blows but rather something that brushes past without stinging or burning or shaking or hurting or drilling but still burns, drills, stings, hurts, shakes. It kills. That humming, that agony, the precarious fraction of a second that precedes the shocks, the loathing for that sharp tip that explodes on contact with my skin, vibrating and hurting and cutting and piercing and destroying brain, teeth, gums, ears, breasts, eyelids, ovaries,

nails, the soles of the feet. My head, my ears, my vagina, my scalp, the pores of my skin give off a burnt smell. (23)

While intensely painful to read, Strejilevich enacts a form of fragmented narration in order to call attention to the excess of pain that escapes representation in language. Her reliance on a series of fragmented clauses joined together by a never ending stream of commas, “ands,” and “ors” conveys this excessiveness through the semantic excessiveness of the sentence itself. Furthermore, her extensive listing of inner and outer body parts conveys the totalizing effects of the shocks. Still, the fragmented narration of the scene resists a sensationalized reading. She does not provide a lucid narration of the tortured body for readers to passively consume. It is only through the gaps, through active reading, that the reader is able to fully recognize the appalling image of this body in pain. But if Strejilevich utilizes a language of fragmentation here in order to represent the abjection that such bodies experience, it is not her only narrative strategy to do so.

Strejilevich also destabilizes an otherwise familiar visit to the dentist as a way of calling attention to the long-term psychic effects of torture:

Finally the doctor invades my intimate spaces with his clamps, picks, and expert glances . . . My mute body, spectator of its own agony, has no strength to react. The current of pain that penetrates to the roots of my gums at least diverts my thoughts away from the surgeon’s face . . . The good thing is that one gets used to suffering, so I summon my courage. I’m prepared to pay in a lump sum, all four molars in one sitting. Just then the tormentor takes pity on me. (101)

Apart from effectively distancing the reader from a surgical procedure that becomes naturalized in our culture, Strejilevich relies upon strong language to unarguably transform this scene into a site of torture. The dentist “invades” her “intimate spaces” with instruments of torture that consist of “clamps, picks, and expert glances.” Her body is rendered “mute,” a “spectator” to “its own agony.” Rendered completely passive, the narrator can only accept the pain, and is ultimately at the hands of her “tormentor” until he “takes pity” on her. Strejilevich therefore not only calls attention to how the psychic effects of torture become long term so that even as one becomes used to suffering at any moment one might experience a psychological relapse, she also utilizes an experience most of her readers can recognize. By using an image and experience widely shared by her readership, Strejilevich attempts to connect the seemingly distant experiences of the political prisoners with something we can relate to, or at least previously thought we could.

While testimonial accounts of torture typically create a narrative framework for understanding the torturers as mythically other-than-human, as Strejilevich reminds us, it is their unrelenting normalness that defines their monstrosity. Indeed, the above passage in which Strejilevich conveys the horror of her fictionalized self witnessing the torture of her brother is the closest we come to a “torture scene” as normalized and naturalized in a North American sense, and even then, the importance of the scene is in its attempt to bear witness to the pain of the other, not of the self. As such, it effectively resists a simplified reading that renders it easily consumable. Rather, as articulated by Alicia Kozameh, the

narrative approach is more akin to “saying ‘blood’ without saying the word” (Kozameh Interview).

One specific approach utilized by the authors to resist sensationalized accounts of physical torture is by focusing on the mundane monotony of their prison experiences, details that illustrate an alternative account of violence, one embedded in the psychological effects of their detainment. As Strejilevich’s narrator tells us:

The mind gradually shrinks, and your world becomes limited to when they open the door, when they close it, what you eat today, what you’ll eat tomorrow, when you’re punished, and when you’re not. Those were the things that mattered to me. When your life gets so small, you forget where you are, who you are. You’re grateful for any friendly gesture, for a plate of decent food; you’re happy to be outdoors for a bit. Thinking becomes pointless. (60)

It is precisely this smallness of life that the mundane reiterates; humans stripped to bare existence. As Kaminsky argues in relation to Partnoy’s *The Little School*, the “tight focus on discrete objects that in other circumstances would be unremarkable (plastic flower, matchbox, tooth, jacket), the investment of emotional and aesthetic energy in unlikely places, is dictated by the constraints of the circumstances” (58). Such constraints lead to passages focused on clothing, food, and bodily functions. Focusing on the details of daily existence, however, does not mean these details are meaningless. Rather, in such constrained atmospheres, such mundane details gain symbolic proportions: “More than nourishment, soup is a timepiece for me. It marks my nights and my dawns until I lose

track and dwell in unrelieved twilight” (Strejilevich 44). By using the presence of the soup in order to maintain an orientation of time, Strejilevich’s narrator resists succumbing to a passive existence.

These works actively claim creatively shaped memory work as a way of countering the quantitative, functionary expectations frequently placed on testimonio. They importantly safeguard against a simplistic fetishization of suffering in which discussions of torture become replaced with figuratively explored meditations on the inexpressibility of abjection within feminist literary testimonio. Temporal disruption is another distinguishing trope that such works utilize to call attention to how traumatic circumstance gives way to psychological effects that extend well beyond the immediate social situation has been resolved. The next section explores how literary feminist testimonios experiment with structural fragmentation to allow readers to gain an understanding of how such trauma is *experienced* beyond a factual recognition of its existence.

*“Sometimes My Geographies Get Jumbled”: The Temporal and Spatial Disruptions of Living Memory*

“It’s not easy to engage in conversation when one is intent on avoiding the edges of the present. How do I tell him that past and future are borders for which I have no visa?” ~Nora Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death*

“I’m a tightrope walker trying to keep my balance between present and past, remembrance and fiction.” ~Nora Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death*

A counter-current to memorializing the act of remembering in feminist literary testimonio is the confrontation of the terror of memory and the threat of it undoing a subject’s ability to act in the present. Indeed, it is this tension between the need to remember and the need to forget that not only calls attention to the difficult “work” of

“memory work” and “counternarrative,” but the very courage it takes to remember when such an act always carries with it the ability to reenact individual, familial, and national trauma. This paradox is at the heart of all three narratives. For instance, in *Steps Under Water*, Sara’s friend constantly tells her “wouldn’t it be better to try to forget a little?” or “It’s best not to stir things up” (131; 133), and yet in the same breath suggests, “[t]he day when we can sit down and have a talk will be a happy one, even though all the catching up is bound to get us down” (132). Similarly, in Strejilevich, the narrator begins by telling us, “I succeed thanks to a technique that obliterates memory . . . The strategy is to remember nothing” (35), and yet the narrator soon arrives at a point in which she needs to remember: “Right then I seal a pact with Nora-to-Come: to remember. I store away these images in the pocket of my memory so I can reach for them whenever necessary” (41).

As I have suggested, if it is the affective component of literary writing that makes it so potent when interlinked with social justice struggles, then one of the ways that literary feminist testimonios highlight this most forcefully is in their exploration of how people’s consciousness becomes affected through the long term effects—both psychological and historical—of torture and trauma. Through narrative disruptions and poetic reflections on the subject of memory, literary testimonios work to mirror the disorienting effects of how the past continues to haunt and overshadow the present, and to dramatize the feelings of isolation and misrecognition that often accompany these experiences. These reflections on the living past continue a critique of recent quandaries on the relevance of testimonio when it lives beyond the immediate circumstances of its intervention by highlighting how these traces of personal and national trauma are always

bubbling under the surface. Through poetic language, the writers of literary testimonio shift readers to move from “knowing” about specific historical circumstances to “understanding” their continued effects on the present—even in removed, far less jarring ways than those directly affected by them—and in so doing, take testimonio to new cognitive places, and open up new political possibilities for this writing project.

As argued by Saúl Sosnowski in “Of Memory’s Literary Sites,” unlike more traditional Latin American testimonios, “[n]either the core of authoritarianism nor the ideological tenets that led to the left’s call to arms are evident in the novel [*Steps Under Water*]. It engages the aftermath, daily survival after defeat as victory is sought in the very act of staying alive” (xiii). The framing chapters of the novel are aptly titled “A Way Back,” heavily dramatizing the ways in which the past continually threatens to invade the present for those who have undergone traumatic situations: “Everything is at once firm and slippery, it’s there and then it vanishes” (1). As the book opens, the narrator, named Sara (although the narration continues to shuttle between first and third person perspective), struggles to reconcile the strangeness of being released from prison with the ordinariness of being back on her parents’ patio. In fact, the strange and the ordinary become entangled, with “familiar” memories of the space taking on new, troubling meanings. Intimate memories and preferences become over-determined. Walking becomes a measured activity. Cats, formerly an object of affection, become something to fear: “going years without seeing animals is not something to take lightly. But she should try to remember how much she liked cats” (6). Kozameh’s depiction of Sara’s seemingly bizarre, irrational reactions to “ordinary” life serve to recreate the sense

of isolation and misrecognition that many imprisoned Argentines experienced when reintegrating into society, an isolation that becomes further marked by the distance she feels from her own parents: “For my father a cat is a cat. To me it is a gesture of mock reverence that freedom makes at me today” (7).

Throughout the text, such feelings of isolation and emotional distance become normalized; paranoia and disorientation are positioned as likely reactions to the mundane for political prisoners who were the targets of sanctioned state terror. Indeed, the perspectives of those on the outside, those unable to intimately understand the disorienting feeling of “normalcy” that become suspect. A reoccurring trope in Kozameh’s novel is the jacket of her boyfriend, Hugo, at the time of her imprisonment. Upon being released, Sara suggests that she is being intentionally followed and tormented by a military official wearing Hugo’s jacket. The repeated image of this man wearing the jacket throughout the narrative marks it a site of extreme distress for her, and yet as Sara recounts, her parents either don’t believe her, or don’t understand the significance it holds for her: “that guy. The same one. But they wouldn’t understand that either. . . The guy didn’t even bother looking over at me, but he left wearing the jacket, just so I’d see him. And my parents don’t believe that, they don’t understand what it means. They don’t want to recognize that vulnerability is a daily fact. And that it’s not easy to neutralize it. Defend against it” (3).

It is precisely the vulnerability of unwitting victims that becomes dramatized in literary testimonio. While more activist renderings are poised to identify and respond to a situation of injustice, those that lean on the literary end of the spectrum seek to help

readers to recognize the more individuated forms of distress experienced by those directly affected, and to build an awareness of the psychological imprints such imposed circumstances leave on their daily lives long after the official “end” of a social situation deemed as historical event. By giving readers glimpses of what this reality might feel like, such narratives work to build empathetic bridges that might translate into increased emotional intelligence on the part of readers on how trauma continually haunts the edges of the present:

‘I feel like I’m sitting in a movie audience. Each little action, each word, isn’t coming from me. I’m not the protagonist. I sit in a coffee shop and from the window I observe all the people walking, running to catch the bus, missing it, I see them talking to others, waving their hands around, I don’t know, I see them living. I guess that’s what they’re doing. But it’s like I’m so far removed from that. I’m in the middle of all that movement, but emotionally I just don’t take part . . . Ever since I was released, I feel like a prisoner more than ever . . .’ (54)

The emotional deadening expressed in this passage gains its force precisely through the imaginative utilization of metaphor and simile. The passage invites us to imagine what it might feel like to not understand oneself as protagonist of one’s own life, but rather as passive observer to life happening around you. Nor is “freedom” positioned as the inevitable consequence of release from prison. Rather, the release, especially when others remain imprisoned, only adds to a sense of isolation and trauma. Through such potent illustrations, feminist literary testimonios beg for a reconsideration of what

testimonio as a writing project can and should accomplish, and work towards decolonizing readers' consciousness more than taking aim at correcting specific material conditions.

Similar to how Kozameh's opening and closing chapters represent Sara's disrupted consciousness during her re-entrance to civil society, and her subsequent fluctuations between past and present, internal thoughts and external stimuli, Strejilevich's *A Single, Numberless Death* structurally mimics the flooding of repressed memories that a seemingly mundane life event can trigger. In the second section of the book, she revisits the Navy Mechanics School, the site of a well-known detention camp during the *coup*. As Strejilevich the narrator suggests, "After thousands were killed there, the land around the Navy School of Mechanics was turned into a sports field. There's no limit to national plastic surgery . . . Today the plan is to interview the students from private schools who are playing ball on these very fields: all-purpose lots that twenty years ago housed torture chambers" (104). And yet Strejilevich actively disrupts the present-based actions by interweaving this main narrative thread with interviews and legal statements that testify to the torture that took place on the grounds. This interplay of past and present reminds us of the psychological distress that accompanies such an act of historical confrontation, and how challenging and brave Strejilevich's actions are. As her narrative voice suggests, "I'm standing at the scene of the events, where life curdles into clumps of horror" (110).

From this statement forward the narrative becomes more sprawling and difficult to temporally navigate, furthering a demand for the audience's active reading practices.

Strejilevich soon moves into a reflection on the limits of legal reparations, and then on to specific memories of traveling to Israel, Spain, and Canada, and the challenges in communicating her legal/national status: “According to a new decree passed in the early nineties by the party then in office, former political prisoners can claim a certain amount of money for each day spent behind bars. That’s fine for the ones who were given due process. But those of us in legal limbo, neither officially incarcerated nor held by legitimately recognized military forces, logically don’t appear in any records. We, therefore, do not exist, and our existence is precisely what we’re trying to prove” (113). Within Strejilevich’s narrative, existence itself becomes formulated as a privilege, one taken for granted by those who have not jumped through bureaucratic hoops to receive legal recognition. The feelings of non-personhood that she recalls in her process to regain her legal identity begin to spill into the narrative present in which she dramatizes the feelings of anxiety she experiences when speaking to the officers at the school, which triggers a sense of re-living the interrogations she was subject to as a political prisoner.

If *Steps Under Water* and *A Single, Numberless Death* specifically dramatize the psychological effects of macro-level state-induced trauma on former prisoners, then *Cereus Blooms at Night* takes it to a micro-level in dramatizing the long-lasting effects of child sexual abuse as experienced by the elderly woman, Mala Ramchandin. While the narrator, Tyler, helps us to understand how the molestation has ultimately affected Mala’s predilection towards nonverbal communication, it is only near the end of the novel that Mootoo directly dramatizes her divided consciousness, and the psychological continuity she experiences between past memories and the present.

Within the multi-layered narrative account, we learn that Otoh Mohanty, son of the former childhood friend and one-time lover of Mala, Ambrose Mohanty, has taken an interest in understanding Mala's eccentricities. On one specific occasion, Otoh decides to dress up in his father's clothes and bring a gramophone to Mala's house as he has heard his father recount he used to do. As Otoh presents himself to his father before heading to Mala's, Ambrose assuringly tells him that "by appearing in front of me like this you have given me the gift of remembering" (145). For Mala, however, whose consciousness already hovers between past and present as her mind continuously replays her childhood trauma, the effect is much more disruptive. Otoh's visit coincides with the blooming of the cereus plant, an event that Mala ritually acknowledges, and which also reminds her of her mother leaving, the very event that marked the advent of her father's abuse. As Otoh approaches dressed in Ambrose's clothing with gramophone in hand, Mala is busy replaying memories of "Pohpoh," her chosen referent for her childhood self, and wishing she could protect her: "Mala wished that she could go back in time and be a friend to this Pohpoh. She would storm into the house and, with one flick of her wrist, banish the father into a pit of pain and suffering from which there would be no escape" (142). Mala's revisitation of such memories reflect her desire that someone could have protected her from her father's sexual abuse the same way in which she protected her own sister, Asha.

The expression of her divided consciousness, while relatively subdued in this passage, soon sets into effect a series of events that reinforce her temporal disorientation, of experiencing a simultaneity of past and present. Thinking that Otoh is Ambrose, Mala

is eager to show him that her father can no longer hurt them. Taking Otoh by the hand, Mala walks him down into the basement, and into a locked room where the decomposing body of her father rests. Otoh immediately reacts, but given Mala's disorientation, she does not understand why he flees. And yet, the narration informs the readers, "As soon as Otoh bolted out of her yard, Mala had sensed that trouble would follow. She wrung her hands in desperation and sadness, wondering if what she thought was a visit from her beloved Ambrose was simply a memory, as vivid as her daydreams about Pohpoh's adventures" (172).

Mootoo's narrative structure becomes increasingly fragmented within the next several pages, with page breaks spaced between Mala's mental fluctuation between past and present, and with her shifting consciousness further reflected through the alternate usage of the referents "Mala" and "Pohpoh." Her memories become a site of refuge as her present is disrupted with police asking questions, and with people stepping onto her property for the first time in years: "A man's voice called out . . . She did not answer. She thought harder of Pohpoh. She ignored the sounds of her fence being torn down" (173). At once a way to resist the disruption of the present, and symptomatic of her traumatic past, Mala clings to her memory as a source of comfort: "Mala remembered. She heard the voices of the police. She reconfigured what they said to match her story of how she saved Pohpoh that day . . . Mala bit the inside of her lip and willed herself to think. She squeezed her eyes tightly and ignored the people trampling, destroying her yard. She put all her efforts into protecting Pohpoh" (175). Indeed, unable to understand the inner workings of Mala's mind, the police can only witness Mala's troubled psyche in

a de-contextualized way: “When he signaled that she was to accompany them he saw her look off to her side and nod, as though in agreement with some imaginary person” (181).

By dramatizing how trauma affects the consciousness on such a deep-rooted level, feminist literary testimonios ask us to revisit the notion of memory as confined to the past, and to consider the concept of living memory. While these works explore how memory can serve a redemptive function—an understanding of self, a refusal to forget historical injustice—they also confront how it can threaten to take over one’s present. As Strejilevich suggests, “sometimes my geographies get jumbled . . . . Memories flood over me, and I’m reliving, reliving, reliving everything” (101; 82). Just as feminist literary testimonios explore how active, intentional memory work can importantly safeguard against such temporal and spatial disorientation, so too do they call attention to the creative means through which survivors of trauma resist the isolating and dehumanizing conditions of their oppression. In fact, these two forms of creative work are interlinked, so that safeguarding against temporal and spatial disorientation through active memory work is what enables the authors to further resist the dehumanizing conditions of their oppression. More than merely “documenting” a myriad of small-scale resistance measures, these works highlight how such moments cultivate essential interpersonal means of resistance that allow survivors of trauma to maintain a sense of dignity, imagination, and even humor, in otherwise bare life conditions.

### **Chapter Nine: Cultivating Interpersonal Resistance: Forging Community Through Creative Communication**

“It was obvious that I was going to start talking . . . That’s what I wished someone would do for me when I was inside. That’s why I never stopped wanting to talk.” ~Nora Strejilevich, *A Single, Numberless Death*

If the existence of testimonio attests to the importance of talking, or of testifying, to the atrocities that one has seen as an essential mode of resistance, then within its pages it also positions readers to acknowledge the numerous daily, seemingly mundane acts of resistance that often go unseen. As I have suggested, the primary interest of literary testimonios is not in bringing attention to organized resistance efforts, but rather to reflect on the resilience of the human spirit, and how it is that people continue to cultivate dignity, connection, and community in such repressive circumstances. Similar to how Beverly Bell's *Walking on Fire* devotes much time articulating a more nuanced understanding of "resistance" for readerships removed from the material and sociopolitical conditions in which the *griyos* are entrenched, literary testimonios often utilize metaphor to convey the symbolic importance of people's ways of coping, and dramatize poignant instances of claiming an agential stance in trying circumstances.

True to the deliberative strain of testimonio, such resistance actively denies epic proportions, at times attaching itself to the very base. For instance, in Partnoy's *The Little School* the narrator makes individual constipation an act of collective resistance:

"I've discovered the cure for constipation," I told Maria Elena one morning . . .

"Really?"

"Yeah, just pretend that Chiche's face is inside the latrine and shitting becomes a pleasure." . . .

We all managed to see Chiche's face. (29)

Reclaiming an act of humiliation in which the guards watched the prisoners relieve themselves, this act of resistance gives renewed meaning to a normal bodily function that enables the prisoners to individually and collectively assert their subjectivity. Similarly, in a particularly tense scene in *A Single, Numberless Death*, a woman is forced to relieve herself while a military official holds a gun to her head:

A warm and liberating river flows between her legs, and she no longer knows, or cares, if the warrior is aiming at her, or if the musical tinkle will arouse his instincts, or if he'll let go of the trigger to grab hold of his penis in the heat of battle. She's no longer there with him, she's alone with her body in a corner of her house, with her waterfall of words, which will be flushed down labyrinths of pipes and start on their journey south, moving unimpeded under barrios, under streets, toward the river; and from there spreading to every shore. (52)

In claiming ownership of her body, the woman refuses to succumb to the terror the military man seeks to elicit, and rather imagines her private act of urination as a means of resistance, one that extends her body beyond the confines of her present situation. Indeed, as both of these examples suggest, it is precisely when the prisoners are positioned as most abject that they utilize their bodies as a safe space from which to engage in collective forms of resistance. As Strejilevich reminds us however, these are not just symbolic narrative strategies: "*When you're surrounded by terror you just don't realize it: you go to bed with terror, you live with terror; it somehow gets incorporated*

*into your routine*” (54). In a constant state of terror, making meaning out of the mundane becomes the only way to survive.

In Argentinean prison testimonios especially, there is the repeated insistence on the prisoners’ recognition of the necessity of collectivity. One of the most profoundly ritualized scenes that articulates creative communications between prisoners as constituting communal resistance is found in Partnoy’s section titled “Bread.” Describing her need to pass on her portion of bread to the other prisoners, the narrator explains, “Bread is also a means of communicating, a way of telling the person next to me: ‘I’m here. I care for you. I want to share the only possession I have’” (84). Partnoy’s detailed description of the narrator dividing up her portion of bread into twenty-five bread balls to share with the others insists on the necessity of the collective: “To be given some bread is to receive a comforting hug” (85). As a way of communicating without utilizing the mode of speech for which they would be punished, the narrator’s act becomes adopted by the other prisoners, and as such, effectively challenges the authority of the guards. By communicating in a way unreadable, and in fact, unknowable, to their captors, the prisoners destabilize the mode of individual isolation the guards seek to impose on them.

Kozameh’s narrative includes a similar scene in which she and the other women prisoners are compelled to perform the ritual of New Year’s Eve dinner, despite their individual physical and psychic unwillingness to do so. Referring to how the dinner was thwarted the previous year after one of the women lost control of her individual

emotions, and describing the chaos that later ensued between the women and the guards, Kozameh strongly depicts Sara's compulsion to carry out the dinner rite:

I sweat. My armpits are drenched. I feel faint, blood pressure dropping, words coming to me, over and over again . . . I don't feel good . . . My ears go cold. My neck. Andrea and Griselda are late in joining the others. They talk, almost whispering, as if there were no other moments in their lives. Just now, when it's imperative that we mingle. My brow is dripping wet. I hope I get over this before somebody notices. Better not have any embarrassing moments on this December 31, at dinnertime. Grist for the piss-eye-chologists. Plenty of them. This isn't going away. And some of them even enjoy the approval of the majorities here. This crap, make it go away. Go away. (125)

After watching the physical manifestations of internal struggle some of the other women prisoners experience, Sara ultimately overcomes her temporary inability to join the women already at the table by reminding herself that "it's imperative that we mingle." Kozameh's reference to the psychologists illustrates how New Year's Eve dinner has come to occupy a naturalized, normalized place in culture, one that is expected to remain unaffected by the less-than-ordinary conditions in which the women prisoners find themselves. Hence, Sara and the other prisoners are compelled to repeat the ritual in order to remain recognizably "human" and to avoid becoming fodder for the psychologists. Thus, there is nothing "voluntary" about partaking in the dinner, and in fact, something inherently selfish about not joining in. Despite their individual rejections

of the dinner, so do they realize that *not* coming together for it threatens to undo their ability to survive. By coming together they make themselves accountable to each other, and it is precisely this accountability that keeps them going.

But the strong communicative bonds formed between the prisoners in these narratives do not only reinforce their individual will to survive. Such collective identification can also threaten to undo their subjectivity. For instance, in one particularly painful scene, Strejilevich's narrator conveys in present tense the horror of hearing her brother tortured: "His moans rip me apart, tear me into countless shreds . . . No, don't pierce me with that scream! Don't let them kill you! My voice breaks as it fleetingly joins yours. Then there is silence. I no longer hear you. I no longer feel myself" (30). The slippage between the "I" and the "you" in this scene is telling. The narrator conveys a sense of physical pain and suffering by bearing witness to the sounds of her brother being tortured, followed by a profound silence that marks his absence. As the narrator more directly suggests further on in the narrative, the loss of her brother profoundly undoes her own claims to subjectivity: "By definition a younger sister's life demands an older brother. I'm left without my basic premise" (119).

Beyond exploring the relationality of human existence, these passages intensely convey the difficulty of survival when we come to define our own subjectivity in terms of our relationship to the collective. Whereas a paradigm of individualism marks a break between self and other, the move to the collective means that the loss of each individual becomes intimately felt as a loss of self. Although these passages specifically reference the loss of kinship ties, Kozameh's narrator, Sara, similarly articulates the difficulty of

functioning as an individual unit after coming to identify so closely with her *compañeras*: “Do you want to know what I feel right now? I want to go back to prison. I miss my friends. I feel guilty. They should be free, all of them. And sometimes I don’t think I deserve this freedom I have” (49). For Sara, as for all of the narrators in these works, “freedom” becomes circumscribed in an inter-relational paradigm; until all are free, none are free.

Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* takes a slightly less pessimistic interpretation of interdependency, and offers one of the most marked examples of the need for and benefits of creative communication by putting forth alternative forms of affiliation and collectivity (Hong 76). The relationship at the heart of the novel, between the young(ish), gender queer Nurse Tyler, and the elderly, isolated Mala Ramchandin, is central to this vision. Both in narrative structure and in the alternative forms of communication developed between these two characters, Mootoo asserts a vision in which the disparate positionalities of Tyler and Mala become the foundation of their “shared queerness” (Mootoo 48). Tyler and Mala’s shared racialized colonial subjectivities and nonnormative sexualities—specifically Tyler’s queer sexuality and gender performance and Mala’s position as incest survivor—reinforce a sense of solidarity that simultaneously refuses to elide difference nor privilege alterity. Rather, through labor-ridden and self-reflexive posturing, Tyler and Mala carefully develop a relationship that depends on an understanding of self in relation to the other.

Mootoo structurally achieves this affect by establishing immediate temporal and spatial connections between Tyler (the narrator) and Mala at the beginning of the novel,

with both causing a commotion upon their almost simultaneous arrival at the alms house. With Tyler's alternative masculine performance and "questionable" sexuality (culminated in the seemingly unimaginable figure of male nurse) causing an initial stir amongst his fellow female nurses, the anomaly of his person is temporarily overshadowed by the excitement of Mala's arrival and the rumors of incest, murder, and insanity that precede—and in a very real way, overdetermine—her. The characters' shared temporal and spatial connection is maintained throughout the novel. For instance, soon after Tyler has been assigned to Mala, he goes to find food for her only to discover that the "other residents had already been fed and the nurses were finishing their meals in the dining room" (13). Tyler responds to the nurses' disregard for their nourishment by bringing back a cup of soup for Mala as well as for himself, telling his still unresponsive patient, "I thought we could eat together" (15).

One of the most significant ways in which Tyler and Mala come to know each other differently is through their predilection towards nonverbal, or extra-linguistic, modes of communication. As Vivian May argues, since language is intimately bound with colonial and imperial projects of domination (125b), their seeming abandonment of it suggests a mutual embrace of listening differently (127b). This is certainly not to romanticize the sexual violations that lead to Mala's reluctance to speak. Rather, it points to how in the face of such trauma, new opportunities and alternative paradigms can emerge. It is precisely through this "listening differently," a fully sensory, embodied listening, that Mala comes to gain trust through Tyler's touch, while Tyler comes to understand Mala through the "words in her eyes" (21).

In his early encounters with Mala, Tyler tells us how “My actions spoke more eloquently than any words” (17), and he continuously strives to make sure his actions can communicate with Mala the way he wants them to. Almost immediately upon meeting Mala, the importance of touch becomes central to his relationship with her:

The urge to touch overcame me . . . I rested my palm gently on her silver hair . . . This one touch turned her from the incarnation of fearful tales into a living human being, an elderly person such as those I had dedicated my life to serving. I needed to know the woman who lay hidden by the white sheet. (11)

In this passage, it is the intimacy of touch that reverses the economies of fear which seek to isolate Mala from a definition of the human. Indeed, Mootoo’s ability to construct such a delicate and profoundly ethical scene is only matched by the “one touch” that enables Tyler to recognize Mala’s humanity. When Mala does awake, Tyler remains focused not only on her, but also on the ways in which she reads his movements: “I began to talk to her, to tell her where she was and who I was, but on hearing my voice she began a deep, fearful moaning. It did not take me long to realize that my movements, no matter how slight, terrified her. I sat still on a chair by her bed, and for an hour she watched as I tried to remain still . . . Still I did not move” (13). And later, “I became actually conscious of my movements and subtleties of my tone, which may have been all that communicated with her” (16).

This embodied form of listening leads Tyler to render himself vulnerable to Mala’s gaze. More than fulfilling his position as nurse, Tyler depends upon his

“intuition” (itself an alternative epistemology when placed in contrast to nursing as a form of medical expertise) which tells him that “the woman on the bed was going to prove herself to be neither crazy nor failing in health, and that she would fare better given more freedom” (20). But if it seems that he is speaking in reference to his recognition of her actions, he blurs the lines by telling us, “perhaps my intuition was nothing more than recalcitrant yearning, for I did fancy that she and I shared a common reception from the rest of the world” (20). Tyler’s self is once again brought to bear on Mala’s person in which he admits that his perception of her is continually in tension with his own sense of self.

It is importantly through Tyler’s narrative filtering though which Mala’s actions are described. We watch her grow increasingly trusting and responsive through his eyes, and see her communicate by what he sees in her eyes: “I tried to decipher the words in her eyes. I did not see fear in them but a pleading. I took that pleading to mean she hoped I would be true to my word” (21). Later, however, he tells us,

I watched her eyes, which I had come to believe were what she used for communicating. Then one evening, perched on the edge of the grounds, we were taking in the yellow sunset and the purpling of the distant valley—well, I was taking it in; I did not know what she was up to in her mind—when a pair of parrots flapped across the sky, squawking leisurely. She made no movement but I distinctly heard a perfect imitation of the parrots’ calls. I dropped to my knees at her side. (23)

The vividness of the scene establishes it as a significant turning point in their relationship. In tune with Mala's use of vision to communicate, and yet still separated by her lack of speech, Tyler literally falls to his knees when she trusts him enough to verbalize her reactions to the beautiful night. As Vivian May argues, as a result of her sexual abuse, rather than "cultivating domination," "[Mala] crafts an embodied, nonhierarchical relation between plant, animal, land, and human, an alternative economy of being in which the pecking order between human, animal, and plant life has been abandoned" (123-124b). Before allowing Tyler into this world, she has to know that he knows how to "listen differently." While the rest of the people at the alms house "lost interest in this new resident . . . she was uncommunicative and seemed to live in a world that did not include them" (23), Mala continually watches him for clues. Indeed, after his initial reaction to her parrot sounds, she responds by imitating a cricket: "I looked into her face, my jaw dropped in admiration and disbelief. She looked directly and proudly back, for the first time a hint of a smile lighting her face . . . Days passed with her calling out, only loud enough for me to hear . . . I would catch her watching me though the side of her eyes, as she did bird, cricket, and frog calls as though to entertain me" (24).

It is when Mala steals a women's nursing uniform for Tyler, however, that we most realize how she has been actively reading Tyler as well. If Tyler is still somewhat patronizing as he waits for her to make "real" communication, he is forced to rethink this as she tells him, "You. You want to wear it" (76). Tyler reacts, "I felt she had been watching me and seeing the same things that everyone saw. But she had stolen a dress for me. No one had ever done anything like that before. She knows what I am, was all I

could think. She knows my nature” (76). Mala does not dwell on the uniform; rather, she immediately goes about constructing her nightly furniture sculptures. When Tyler is initially disappointed in her lack of attention, he realizes it is the most generous response he could ask for: “The reason Miss Ramchandin paid me no attention was that, to her mind, the outfit was not something to either congratulate or scorn—it simply was. She was not one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom” (77). As Tyler reflects on what Mala’s actions meant for him, he tells us, “It had been a day and an evening to treasure. I had never felt so extremely ordinary, and I quite loved it” (78).

The privilege to be ordinary is what Mala and Tyler come to expect from and respect most about each other’s willingness to engage in creative communication. As Tyler comes to realize, while this is not something utterly unique to their relationship, it is only through Mala that he is able to reflect on present and past relationships that similarly become legible through an ability to see, listen, and read differently. Whether in his developing relationship with Otoh, or in reflecting on his closeness with Nana, he is only able to do so in relation to considering how “Miss Ramchandin and I, too, had a camaraderie: we had found our own ways and fortified ourselves against the rest of the world” (48).

This sense of camaraderie, of “fortifying ourselves against the rest of the world,” is a current that runs through all of these works, and one that especially manifests itself in each author’s dialogic structural experimentations with polyvocality. Insofar as creative modes of communication allow for interpersonal relations to prosper in sites of profound

imposed isolation and through gestures and silences, each author extends this symbolic emphasis on interpersonal connection beyond quaint “resistance.” Rather, as I explore in the next section, these works each put forth visions of positive, self-conscious interdependence as that which can destabilize unequal structures of power and potentially propel us towards more egalitarian models of relationality that can enable new modes of subjectivity and political consciousness.

*“Kinship Forged Out of Situational Circumstance”: Narrative Communities of Meaning, or Toward An Epistemology of Polyvocality*

Although employed differently than in activist testimonio, feminist literary testimonios maintain a polyvocal narrative structure that reinforces how multiple perspectives work to strengthen the epistemological relevance of the fragmented stories being told within their pages. This narrative maneuver projects a relational account of human community in which the boundaries between self and other become overlapping and mutually constituting. In works that self-consciously straddle fiction and documentary, as in *Steps Under Water* and *A Single, Numberless Death*, the polyvocal element is highlighted through their structural intercutting of interviews, diaries, and official documents alongside of, and entangled with, the personal literary narratives of Strejilevich and Kozameh, which brings attention to the processes of dialogic exchange that enabled the book to be written. In more fictional pieces such as *Cereus Blooms at Night*, the narrative perspective shifts between multiple speakers, with each contributing different anecdotal snippets and personal knowledge of the complicated family history that contributes to Mala Ramchandin’s “queerness,” and which reinforces the epistemic

importance of a community of knowers working together to arrive at more complete truth.

In *Steps Under Water* and *A Single, Numberless Death*, one of the central ways the epistemological strength of a polyvocal approach to historical memory is taken up is through different characters' and authors' reflections on the topic of "freedom." Within the fragmented narration in *A Single, Numberless Death*, Strejilevich juxtaposes several differing responses to "freedom." For instance, one of her interviewees expresses shock at how quickly she adjusted to being outside of prison, "*I got used to being free in no time. Whenever I thought of being released I imagined it would be kind of weird, that I'd stumble on the sidewalk, feel totally disoriented. But no, it wasn't that way at all. I went out and felt great joy in simply walking down the street*" (81).

Another interviewee provides an account of the sensual dimension of her release, "*My first day out of jail I got up at dawn and stepped outside very early to see my first sunrise in nine years. I took a walk, wet my feet on the dew-covered grass, meandered along the train tracks, whatever—simply to experience that thing called freedom. That night, I remember, I went out for an ice cream. The lights made my head spin*" (80).

While this account documents a sense of being overwhelmed ("the lights made my head spin"), it nevertheless conveys a sense of appreciation for and delight in what the world has to offer. In contrast, Strejilevich's own account conveys a much deeper, more threatening sense of disorientation and unpreparedness to re-enter civil society: "My head is spinning, I don't have any documents and not a single penny. I tell the waiter I was mugged and ask him for change. I run to the bus stop clutching the coins in my

hand. I'm fleeing, unused to being free" (80). Strejilevich's perspective self-consciously focuses on the material challenges of reintegration, especially in terms of finances and documents, and how one's physical "release" does not equate to an easy cognitive transition.

Similarly, in *Steps Under Water*, the stream of consciousness narrative style of the opening and closing chapters dramatizes the surrealism the narrator, Sara, experiences: "everything else that came along seemed to me to be a lie. How could all those living trees be real, those cornfields, those shadows? There was only one truth and that was jail, the state of confinement" (145). Meanwhile, in the written exchanges and verbal dialogues included in the other chapters, Kozameh gives disconcerting perspective on the various ways former political prisoners do (not) adapt: "Here, look at this picture: my little girl, our third. We had her in order to have something new to hold onto. We just couldn't take it anymore. We still can't. Lia stays with me for reasons that make me want to weep" (29).

But the most exciting use of a polyvocal framework manifests when it is taken *beyond* its function of voicing multiple narrative reflections on a single theme. Rather, in feminist literary testimonios, plural-perspective narrational practices become utilized to explore alternative kinship and relationship formations that move readers to think differently about questions of difference and interdependency. In providing reflection on the political possibilities available to us when we recognize diversity of social location as an epistemic resource rather than as a hurdle to interconnection, these works articulate how a self-conscious acknowledgement of our multiple webs of entanglement with

others—whether chosen or imposed—can move us towards relational modes of consciousness that can be utilized to confront these very same barriers, whether on structural or personal levels. This is what Strejilevich articulates in “Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth” when she rehearses her realization of needing to talk to people from the “same place” in order to better know and understand the historical gravity of her own story (711). By seeking out her own self-defined community of knowers, Strejilevich does not reduce her conception of “same place” to social homogeneity, but rather in terms of interpretive congruence. By connecting with others who maintain a shared conception of the world either in response to their own experiences as political prisoners during the Dirty War, as family and friends to those imprisoned or disappeared, or as activists who have politically dedicated themselves to seeking retribution for those affected, Strejilevich enables an interpretive process that allows for a more objective, three-dimensional understanding of her own social situation and articulates a complex politics of and commitment to engaging social difference.

In other words, while historical circumstance might determine how we come to know each other, literary feminist testimonios put forward a cautious hope that the relationships forged in the midst of imposed, oppressive social situations can nevertheless mean in excess of the conditions themselves. Indeed, in the face of structural injustice, and as these narratives differently suggest, sometimes interpersonal connection is all we have. Such literary explorations of alternative kinship systems and human relationships strongly resonate with M. Jacqui Alexander’s assertion in *Pedagogies of Crossing* that the process of becoming “more fully human” is intimately linked to “the urgent task of

configuring new ways of being and knowing and to plot the different metaphysics that are needed to move away from living alterity premised in difference to living intersubjectivity premised in relationality and solidarity” (17, 8). Through a series of essays linking anticapitalist and nationalist critique, the contradictions of feminist, queer, and critical race studies, and a transnational agenda, Alexander lays the groundwork for an embodied notion of intersubjective living that imagines “the human” as interdependent (6), accountable to both the self and the collective (18), and consistent with ways of being that “do not always already mobilize an ‘other’” (109).

As Alexander’s work suggests, working towards a model of positive interdependence need not mean that we subscribe to an overly idealistic notion of overcoming our social differences through interconnection. Her own analyses hardly remain complicit in perpetuating romanticized and deeply problematic Enlightenment notions of the human, as she balances philosophical notions of intersubjectivity with a (post)colonial lens that foregrounds issues of (neo)colonialism, gender, sexuality, race, and class. What her work does insist upon, however, is that while most of our interpersonal relationships may be formed out of imposed, often oppressive, social circumstances, this does not mean that we cannot actively cultivate meaningful relationships from such conditions. On the contrary, through a self-conscious working through of our social interdependencies we can employ such imposed relationships to collectively combat the unequal power relations that have produced them.

This is why the polyvocal structure is so important in feminist literary testimonio, as its very narrational frame insists upon such dialogic understanding, and is differently

explored by Strejilevich, Kozameh, and Mootoo in their individual narrational experimentations. For Strejilevich this is primarily accomplished through her narrative framework, as evidenced in her transparent acknowledgement of the diverse resources, discourses, and perspectives needed to create a more historical, less subjective account of her experience as an Argentinean political prisoner and in her search for meaning in the aftermath of this political climate. While Kozameh also structurally plays with dialogic exchange, the most interesting way in which she grapples with the political possibilities of alternative forms of kinship and interdependence forged through situational circumstance is in her exploration of the bonds formed between *compañeras*. Similarly, Mootoo's tale is propelled just as much by the interconnections she forms between the work's sprawling web of characters as by its plot development. Through the central trope of the cereus plant, described as a "network of spring, three-sided stems and fleshy leaves" (130), we hear the theoretical echoes of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the rhizome. With multiple entry and exit points between characters and subplots, interconnected traumas and tribulations, the cereus plant becomes representative of the narrative structure itself.

Though *Cereus Blooms at Night* is organized around the character of Mala Ramchandin, as filtered through the perspective of Tyler, the overlapping and interconnected stories serve to foreground how *all* interpersonal webs of entanglement, like the cereus plant itself, have their moments of beauty and decay: "With the force of a broken fire hydrant, the cereus blossoms spewed heavy perfume in the air . . . The scent of the cereus with its two edges—one a vanilla-like sweetness, the other a curdling—so

permeated the air that she could taste it on her tongue as though she were lapping it from a bowl” (152). Similar to the two fragrant edges of the cereus plant, in Mootoo’s narrative world, interpersonal interdependencies are not innately good or bad, they simply are. It is Mala’s trial and the disruption of her quiet life that bring Tyler and Otoh together; it is Mala’s mother’s decision to escape a life of unhappiness to be with her lover, Lavinia, that leads to Mala’s sexual abuse at the hands of her father; it is the brief period of happiness and consensual sexual pleasure with Ambrose that leads to Mala’s retreat from sanity; it is Mr. Hector’s tender memory of his sexually persecuted brother that enables him to develop a “kinship forged out of situational circumstance” with Tyler (74); it is through their mutual ostracization that Mala and Tyler develop a beautiful relationship that allows them both to “bloom” in otherwise unwelcoming circumstances. Indeed, as Otoh is voicing his guilt for the role he played in Mala’s residence at the alms house, Tyler narrates: “I reminded him that if it weren’t for his intervention, as unfortunate as it may have seemed in the moment, she and I, *and* he and I, would likely not have met” (123).

While Mala is considered to function beyond the rational, and is thereby dismissed by those in the ironically named “Paradise,” Lantanacamara, it is through Mala, and precisely because of the relationship she cultivates with the natural world that Mootoo positions us to recognize fundamental lessons on how it is only the principles of interdependency and difference that remain constant in life. While both of these realities maintain the dual edge of beauty and decay as symbolically represented by the cereus plant, it is only when we accept, and stop actively working against these principles that

Mootoo's narrative suggests we can move beyond our social traumas, so they can be placed alongside of those experienced by others, thereby enabling them to serve as resources rather than divisions.

This is beautifully summarized in a scene between Mr. Hector, the gardener, and Tyler, as Mr. Hector offers Tyler a flower to give to Mala:

I don't really know how to explain, but Miss Ramchandin might not react well to it. I think it is a very generous thing, that you want to give it to her. It's very touching, actually. No one here has really been kind to her . . . I am beginning to understand some things about her and I think that she does not like things in nature to be hurt. To her, the flower and the plant would be both suffering because they were separated from each other. (69)

This realization is, of course, soon solidified for Tyler when Mala steals the women's nurse's uniform for him, and is refreshingly unphased by him wearing it: "She knows what I am, was all I could think. She knows my nature" (75). By opening herself up to the "nature" of others rather than forcing upon them her own expectations Mootoo develops Mala's character to position readers to reconsider our own modes of relationality. Mala's character prompts us to work towards modes of interconnectedness that recognize difference and interdependencies as epistemic resources that can help us to more fully reveal ourselves to each other, and that don't necessitate separating the flower from the plant, blossom from decay. As Mootoo's narrative suggests, once we come to accept the inherent imperfections of these human relationships, rather than search for

some pure alternative, we can begin to imagine how alternative kinship systems might just be what can take us beyond relations of domination.

Of course, *Cereus Blooms at Night* most intimately explores this theme through the unlikely, yet deeply transformational, relationship established between Nurse Tyler and Mala Ramchandin. The spatial and temporal proximity between the two is established immediately, and structurally woven into the narrative framework, insofar as Tyler, as narrator, becomes conveyer of Mala's story as well as his own. As Tyler suggests, he is hardly able to tell his own story without simultaneously knowing it through Mala's (3, 105). The intersubjective relationality and mutuality of their stories is established on the first page of the novel as Tyler explains,

my own intention, as the relater of this story, is not to bring notice to myself or my own plight. However, I cannot escape myself, and being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of the events, I am bound to be present . . . Forgive the lapses, for there are some, and read them with the understanding that to have erased them would have been to do the same to myself. (3)

Tyler's assertion adeptly calls into question any notion of a neutral, or "objective," narrative account, a claim that has profound resonances with hegemonic accounts of history that naturalize the teller and in so doing threaten to render silent non-normative and marginalized voices such as his own. This vision of human interdependence, in which we know ourselves in and through our relation to others, thus assumes a prominent

role in Mootoo's novel through Tyler's attempt to make transparent his own traces on Mala's story, thereby holding himself accountable to her.

This understanding of the human as interdependent and relational is furthered in Tyler's second instance of narrative posturing in which he speaks to an imagined Asha: "thanks to your sister, my own life has finally—and not too late I might add—began to bloom" (105). As such, Tyler continues to narrate an intersubjective vision in which he weaves together a "single garment out of myriad parts" (105), a delicate task that on the one hand resists romanticizing a shared identification with Mala, and on the other continues to highlight how the disparate social positionings Tyler and Mala inhabit do not disable them from relating to and through one another.

Despite his affinity with Mala, however, Tyler is not immune to the scandalous rumors that abound. Indeed, even as we understand him to share a deep empathy with her, he tells us, "Sometimes, I have to admit, I thought of the stories I had heard. I would edge myself out of Miss Ramchandin's sight whenever I tried to imagine her in the roles they had cast her in" (24). In many ways, it seems that Tyler must un-know much of what he takes for granted in order to enter into a truly intersubjective relationship with Mala. This unlearning takes many forms, but tellingly begins with their first meeting:

For such a tiny spectre of a being, the new resident breathed deeply and loudly in her drugged sleep. I squatted at the side of the canvas stretcher, peering at her. I expected her facial skin to be grey but it was ochre, like richly fired clay . . . . I rested my palm gently on her silver hair. I expected it to be coarse and wiry, qualities that would have fit the

rumours. But her hair, though oily from lack of care, was soft and silken . . . She did not have the sweet yet sour smell I had come to expect whenever close to an old person. Instead, an aroma resembling rich vegetable compost escaped from under the sheet. (11)

From their first encounter, Mala challenges the many assumptions Tyler places upon her. He does not expect that such a physically delicate person can breathe that deeply. Nor does he expect her skin to be so vibrant, her hair so soft, her smell so robust. Soon after, he is also forced to reconsider the weight of her person: “Having judged only by her frail looks, I was surprised at her weight, forgetting for a moment the density of bone” (12). This constant re-evaluation and reconsideration of all that Tyler thinks he knows becomes a profound commentary on the process of decolonizing interpersonal relations. Suddenly estranged from what his expertise as nurse has taught him, his encounter with Mala fundamentally disrupts his will to know, and it is his gradual willingness to unknown, or perhaps, know differently, that marks the distinctness of his relationship with Mala.

The threat of over identification is riddled with conflict throughout the novel’s opening pages. Tyler continually reveals how his admiration for Mala constantly runs the risk of romanticizing and patronizing her. Just after Tyler and Mala share their highly ritualistic meal of bread and soup, he tells us, “Filled with a sense of success, I pulled the sheet up around her neck and quietly left . . . I imagined further successes, immeasurable feats that I might accomplish with my great understanding and magnanimity. Finally, nausea at my own ballooning sense of self wore me down and I slept” (17). Mootoo’s pairing of Tyler’s tendency toward self-aggrandizement, paired with a wry sense of

humor that probingly interrogates his motives and their implications, anticipates the audience's dismissal of their relationship as impossibly utopic and unattainable.

Tyler's continued self-reflexivity comes to add another layer of depth to the text, insisting the two are unequivocal subjects who are nevertheless able to mutually recognize the complex humanity of the other. Thus, even when Tyler does risk eschewing their differences, Mootoo insists he hold himself accountable: "The temptation is strong, I will admit, to be the romantic victim. There is in me a performer dying for the part, but I must be strict with myself and stay with my intention to relate Mala Ramchandin's story" (15). Tyler's indulgences mark him as imperfect, and thus fundamentally human. As such, we do not fault him for when he does not immediately undo Mala's restraints. Rather, we applaud his courage when he does and as he holds himself accountable for not doing so sooner: "I sat by her head, slipped my arm under her back and pulled her into my arms. I held her against my chest, rocking her until the first streaks of morning light broke through the pitch black sky" (21).

While the purely fictional realm of *Cereus Blooms at Night* allows Mootoo to thematically explore relational possibilities to poetic depths, Kozameh's exploration of the bonds formed between *compañeras* provides a parallel consideration of how imposed social circumstance need not serve as an impediment to interconnection; rather, such circumstances can enable opportunities to meaningfully work across social difference and to open new relational potential. For instance, when Sara is first imprisoned, Kozameh takes the opportunity to have another inmate, Adriana, comment on how the class system does not simply disappear in these altered circumstances: "And those two that won't

come over here, see them? They're prostitutes. They never fit in anywhere. They feel that the regulars like us are high class. We really make them sick. I can imagine what you must be feeling facing all of us. All the political ones are professional and students, from rich families. Or almost all of them right?" (25).

Through Adriana's summary of how the class system is maintained within prison walls, readers are positioned to resist an overly utopic notion of the solidarity formed between *compañeras*. And yet, in the chapter entitled, "Sara, Elsa, Marco, and the Dance of Great Sadness," Kozameh delivers a realistic, heartbreaking scenario that insists on the strength of such relations forged through situational circumstance. In striking parallel to how the "shared queerness" between Mala and Tyler allow them to negotiate their social differences, and to join forces against the unwelcoming alms house atmosphere they both face, this chapter highlights how the bonds established between Sara and Elsa, as a result of their shared prison experience allows them to work beyond a heteronormative relational paradigm when they find themselves on "the outside."

Through several different narrative "versions," Kozameh paints a portrait of a love triangle in which the hetero marriage of Elsa and Marco is disrupted by Marco's relationship with Sara, *compañera* of Elsa. As Kozameh moves between "Christina's Version," "Sara and Marco's Version," to "Elsa and Marco's Version, That Same Night," to "Sara and Elsa's Version In the Train That Will Take Sara Far Away," readers become privy to the simultaneous vulnerability and strength that former political prisoners experience as they re-enter their pre-existing personal relationships and lives. Sara's budding relationship with Marco highlights her personal floundering to regain some

sense of human connection, and yet this very relationship threatens to undo her friendship with Elsa. Such an act certainly challenges a utopic notion of relationships of solidarity established between *compañeras*, in its embodied betrayal of such trust.

And yet, rather than reinforce the worn narrative of women's bonds severed by heteronormative relations, Sara and Elsa's narrative takes a detour. Whereas it is usually the male who is positioned as having the upper hand in such romantic situations, Marco instead vocalizes his feelings of exclusion from Elsa's life: "Prison changed you, Elsa. You don't love me anymore . . . Your friends and your son hold a privileged place in your life" (68). As the "versions" progress, Elsa grows cognizant of how Marco's relationship with Sara is a misdirected attempt at regaining her own affection and attentions. Whereas the aftermath of state sponsored terror might lead some readers to anticipate a contraction of human relationships of those affected, this moment highlights quite the opposite: an expansion. Rather than simply purge Sara from their relationship to regain their footing as a couple, they come to express a shared concern for Sara's well-being. In "Elsa and Marco's Version, In Their Car Parked Near The Command Post At The II Army Corps," they ask: "What are we doing here, together, looking out for Sara, so afraid of what might be happening behind those walls, desperate to see her come out, walk, move like any human being on the street, fretting over the possibility that she might not appear, that she might never emerge from that fortress of horror?" (69). Even in such a difficult moment in their relationship—a difficulty induced by Sara herself—Marco and Elsa find themselves thinking beyond themselves, of experiencing an overwhelming, inexplicable concern for Sara. And it is through this sense of expansion that they come to

a reorganization of the relationships between them: “What are the two of us doing, inside our car, our arms around each other? What are we doing? Maybe we’re already in a position to give ourselves a unique and enviable response: we watch over Sara” (70).

Whereas many narratives would end here, with hetero-romantic love triumphing over women’s friendship, Kozameh writes beyond this ending. In the final, understated scene of the chapter, Sara and Elsa are talking just before Sara’s departure:

‘What a mess . . .’

‘Sara, listen, that was just a very tiny part of all this horror. And, if you think about it, my being away all those years. You being so beautiful, intelligent and sophisticated, crazy and ballsy . . . Me getting out of prison and completely dedicated to getting Lucas back again. How could Marco not fall in love with you? And you, with Hugo in jail, love-starved, like anyone else, you get your freedom and are alone, how could you not be tempted by someone like Marco? Warm, protective, a good person. He’s very weak now, after all these years. I have to take care of him . . . And you know what? You were right: you and I know a lot about life . . . We know so much . . . Sara, all of us have been very strong, but we’ve suffered a lot. We’re still suffering. And I love you.’ (70-71)

While profound simplicity and truth resounds within the entirety of this passage, it is the final two phrases that most highlight a sense of expansion. It is only in thinking beyond themselves that Elsa and Sara can attest to the strength of the bonds formed between the *compañeras* due to situational circumstance: “We’re still suffering. And I love you.”

Given the scale of horror both have witness, these personal indiscretions pale in comparison. While it is not that they do not matter—as readers we have witnessed all three characters on the verge of their own undoing—it is that Sara and Elsa have gleaned enough perspective to know that their bondedness extends beyond this situation; their relationship runs deeper than such a betrayal can cut. Though they might not even have been friends without their shared experience as political prisoners, the imposed conditions of their friendship mean less than the relational connections they have been able to create. It is no accident that Kozameh closes the chapter from their narrational perspective. Here the women are configured as the strong ones, the knowers (“You’re right. We know so much.”), and Marco, the would-be dominant figure in another tale, is so “very weak,” in need of Elsa’s caretaking.

*Envisioning Possibilities: Testifying to the Epistemological Importance of the Imagined*

In this section I have highlighted how feminist literary writers have been especially cognizant of how it is the testimonial framework itself that provides a testimonio with its force, regardless of how documentary or imagined a narrative’s actual substance. Furthermore, I have illustrated how their chosen focus on interpersonal connections, more so than structural inequalities, is a conscious political choice that is worthy of more consideration than simply romanticizing “small scale resistance.” Rather, such works seek to highlight the *experience* of memory, and to actively explore how the various ways we remember and tell might enable us to create new epistemological possibilities out of well-worn social narratives, including those of oppression and resistance. In so doing, feminist literary testimonios take the writing project beyond dramatized representations of socially imposed assaults on the

consciousness of marginalized social subjects to impart complex meanings of subjectivity, marginality, and sociopolitical violence.

More so than the mere “survival” of imaginative capabilities in the face of state sponsored terror and personal trauma, these works highlight a more profound truth: how repressive conditions both *enable* and *necessitate* the imagination to flourish. While oppressive social conditions necessarily interrupt and infiltrate the ways in which social actors experience their present, it is precisely by accepting and working through such hardships that we come to imagine different ways of being in the world. These other ways of being become inseparable from the work of imagining politically progressive alternative relational paradigms that remain cognizant of our interdependencies with each other, without resisting such imposed interconnections and without seeking simple or transparent resolutions.

The epistemological value of such relationships, even when explored in an imagined, literary way, open new doors for conceptions of subjectivity, history, and knowledge production, allowing the polyvocal frameworks established by these works to move beyond narrative strategy. At their most ambitious, these work to develop an epistemology of polyvocality that insists on the epistemic value of communities of meaning, and that enables us to appreciate the ways in which how diversity of perspectives, social locations, and experiences can become assets in working towards more nuanced, mutually beneficial social realities.

Thus, even while engaging with the underbelly of human relations, feminist literary testimonios put forth their truths as cautious, deliberate, and hard won symbols of

hope. In *Cereus Blooms at Night* the narrative ends on just such a note as Tyler makes one final plea to Mala's sister, Asha: "Not a day passes that you are not foremost in our minds. We await a letter, and better yet, your arrival. You are to her, the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night" (Mootoo 249). If such a plea for Asha's potential reply represents an open hope of her ability to counter Mala's deep-seated traumas, so too can we understand Mootoo to be philosophically asking her readers to engage the ethical call of her text: to open ourselves to the possibility of *epistemically expansive social relations* as a corrective to socially imposed restrictions.

### ***Section Five: Translating Worlds: Edwidge Danticat and Feminist Testimonio in the Haitian Context***

"Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I've always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them. Coming from where I come from, with the history I have—having spent the first twelve years of my life under both dictatorships of Papa Doc and his son, Jean-Claude—this is what I've always seen as the unifying principle among all writers . . . . I am even more certain that to create dangerously is also to create fearlessly, boldly embracing the public and private terrors that would silence us, then bravely moving forward even when it feels as though we are chasing or being chased by ghosts . . . . Creating fearlessly even when cast *lot bo dlo*, across the seas. Creating fearlessly for people who see/watch/listen/read fearlessly."

~Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*

Storyteller Edwidge Danticat has built a career on producing historically grounded fictions that testify to the lives and cultural vitality of Haitians and Haitian Americans in the face of colonial legacies and neocolonial conditions, particularly the intergenerational lives of women. Danticat's 1995 short story cycle *Krik? Krak!* received wide acclaim in the United States, including a National Book Award nomination, and was seen as a strong follow up to her debut novel, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* which itself earned a spot in Oprah's Book Club. Since then, she has received the MacArthur Genius Award, and her books have consistently found themselves on the *New York Times*

bestseller list, a compelling marker that Danticat and her work have been accepted by U.S. mainstream readership. In 2010, Danticat was also approached by several mainstream media sources to weigh in on the disastrous consequences of Haiti's earthquake, and she has become increasingly outspoken on US immigration policies.<sup>61</sup> Danticat's work spans the genres of novel, short story, memoir, young adult literature, children's literature, magazine articles, and non-fiction testimonies. She has readily made herself available for news interviews, author interviews, literary panels, and educational lecturing.

Combined, Danticat's public persona and literary presence highlights the significance she places on the political importance of cultural representations. As a politically engaged Haitian American author who understands representational politics as occupying a central terrain in social struggle, the multiple hats she wears as a public figure—storyteller, journalist, cultural critic—highlights her increasing strides to gain access to the imagination of mainstream American readerships. This section performs a series of close readings of Danticat's work to highlight the subtle and explicit evocations of testimonio within her corpus of historically grounded literature. By claiming a space in the US publishing market and news media, Danticat enables an opening for the life experiences of Haitians and Haitian Americans—particularly those of Haitian (American) women—to reach a readership that has been comfortably able to ignore the imperialist historical relations between the United States and Haiti and the marginalization of Haitian

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<sup>61</sup> Indeed, shortly after the recent earthquake in Haiti several mainstream media sources interviewed Danticat in their search for “expert” perspectives. The ways in which Danticat was framed on several of these shows, however, limited the knowledge and insight of the author to a tokenized “voice” for the Haitian people.

Americans within US borders. Danticat's ability to maneuver between different genres and forums highlights how she views representation as a highly political and delicate act, and the complexities of her self-conscious labors are as present in her discussions of her work as in her literary representations themselves.

While not ignoring the widespread unidirectional interpretive practices involved in mainstream U.S. readerships reading Danticat's work, this section focuses its efforts on the ways that Danticat anticipates such modes of neocolonial, consumptive readings practices by utilizing language and representational techniques that resist such readings from the outset. Chapter Ten addresses how her hybrid language and representational systems allow her to put her "diaspora" identity to effective use by bridging different linguistic and epistemic worlds. By considering the multilingual strategies through which she employs language as a political tool that simultaneously speaks to different audiences in different registers, I consider the ways in which she utilizes English as a bridging mechanism to connect disparate social groups and epistemes. Its second section builds on these analyses through a focus on Danticat's polyvocal narrative structure in *Krik?* *Krak!* and how the short story collection's fragmented and multiplicitous narratives allow for a socially stratified group of voices that productively challenges a one-dimensional account of Haitian "culture." By housing various interpretations of historical events they position culture as a site of contestation in which one's social location becomes a critical component for how one understands the world. Chapter Eleven highlights her use of multiple genres to explore parallel themes, and how working between and across genres allows her to more effectively reach different audiences in appropriate conceptual

registers. Specifically, it examines how Danticat differently approaches the theme of immigration through the medium of young adult first person fiction in *Behind the Mountains*, and in her adult memoir, *Brother, I'm Dying*. The section's conclusion brings discussion back to the role of the reader in order to reflect on the limitations and possibilities engendered through Danticat's ability to write across diffuse interpretive registers, and the political openings this allows for building affinities between differently situated reading publics.

### **Chapter Ten: "You're a Diaspora, What Do you Know?": On Danticat's Floating (Linguistic, National) Allegiances and Claiming the Tenth Department**

"One of the advantages of being an immigrant is that two very different countries are forced to merge within you. The language you were born speaking and the one you will probably die speaking have no choice but to find a common place in your brain and regularly merge there."

"Translating—retranslating—that story from the original English in which I had written it had been a surreal experience. It was as if the voice in which I write, the voice in which people speak Creole that comes out English on paper, had been released and finally I was writing for people like my Tante Illyana, people who did not read, not because they did not have enough time or because they had too many other gadgets or distractions, but because they had never learned how."

~Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*

If it remains fairly obvious how Danticat offsets dominant Western epistememes through her themes of immigration and diaspora, Haitian folklore and Vodou epistemology, it remains less immediately obvious how she is able to accomplish this through her employment of English, a dominant US and global language. It is therefore Danticat's pragmatic and tactical employment of English and her accompanying linguistic maneuvers that I explore within this chapter. At a fundamental level, this chapter argues that as one of few Haitian writers working in English, this linguistic choice enables her to gain access to a readership that writing in French or Creole would

not allow her.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, this section seeks to account for Danticat as a historically situated subject, and to highlight how her linguistic “choices” are highly entwined with the reality of her having lived in the US from the age of 12. While French and Creole served as her primary languages in Haiti, her entrance into the US—and particularly its education system—significantly limited these languages to the private sphere and to exchanges with family and friends.<sup>63</sup> If it is true that language shapes thought, then the multilingual strategies that resonate within Danticat’s use of English speak to processes of socialization she underwent upon moving to the U.S. and the psychological effects experienced by the author. Indeed, it can be argued that Danticat “creolizes” English through both her phrasings and her explicit maneuvering between (national) language systems.<sup>64</sup> Through such actions, Danticat blurs distinctions between “Western” and “non-Western” epistemes by creating linkages between and across audiences and cultural references, and embodying the hyphenated social position of the author herself.

Born in Haiti, Danticat became Haitian American at age 12 when her parents, already living in Brooklyn, sent for her. Danticat’s diasporic identity has proven confounding and controversial to disparate audiences who want to make her their own. To some, it is Danticat’s residence within the U.S.—despite her living in places with a

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<sup>62</sup> It is also important to note that through continual processes of cultural intermixing and the massacring of native Caribbean peoples, there is no coherent originary language or culture accessible to Danticat that predates the French colonial influence. Furthermore, as an immigrant writer publishing in a country dominated by English, Danticat must also consider her audience and point of entry.

<sup>63</sup> Chicana feminist scholars, including Gloria Anzaldúa’s *La Frontera/The Borderlands*, have explicitly taken up this stratification of linguistic codes. The interlingual language negotiations spoken of by Anzaldúa certainly speaks to the forms of code switching that I understand as underpinning Danticat’s use of English.

<sup>64</sup> This can also be said of fiction writer Assia Djebar, who is said to “arabic-ize” her use of French through similar tactics as argued in Anne Donadey’s “The Multilingual Strategies of Postcolonial Literature: Assia Djebar’s Algerian Palimpsest.” *World Literature Today*. 74:1 (2000).

decidedly Haitian presence, including Brooklyn and Miami—that determines the way in which her fiction should be categorized. Mainstream U.S. Anglo audiences are often quick to claim her work as squarely within “American” literature, even as some continue to position her in the “ethnic” sector, a positioning Danticat works hard to challenge (Smith 195). Alternately, Haitians living in Haiti are sometimes suspicious of her physical proximity to the metropole, and thus in some cases, reluctant to claim her as their own.<sup>65</sup> In *The Butterfly’s Way*, a collection of Haitian American writings edited by Danticat, she discusses how calling someone a “diaspora” serves as a distancing mechanism so as to challenge knowledge claims from someone considered not-quite-Haitian-enough: “when expressing an opposing political point of view in discussion with friends and family members living in Haiti . . . [they] knew that they could easily silence me by saying, ‘What do you know? You’re a ‘Diaspora’” (xiv).

In many ways, Danticat’s biography attests to her ability to straddle multiple worlds, and her commitment to using her creative writing as a way to actively engage in cross-border cultural work by speaking to and across multiple audiences. Indeed, Danticat’s own personal border crossings problematize over-simplified notions of “authenticity” and “origins,” that normative geographical literary categories demand. Rather, Danticat actively works against such cultural ownership by drawing upon her autobiographical experiences as a diasporic subject to render intelligible her both/and approach to language and culture: “When I say ‘my country’ to some Haitians, they

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<sup>65</sup> In *Create Dangerously*, Danticat suggests that the most frequent criticism she receives from Haitian nationals is that her fictional works “lie” about Haitian cultural experiences (as manifested by the *Breath, Eyes, Memory* “testing” scandal). Additionally, Danticat states, “‘You are a parasite and you exploit your culture for money and what passes for fame,’ is the second most common type of criticism I get from inside the community” (33).

think I mean the United States. When I say ‘my country’ to some Americans, they think of Haiti.’ My country, I felt, both as an immigrant and as an artist, was something that was then being called the tenth department. Haiti had nine geographic departments and the tenth was the floating homeland, the ideological one, which joined all Haitians living outside of Haiti” (*Create Dangerously* 49). In staking a claim in how she and other Haitian Americans inhabit a “between-worlds space” (González 182), Danticat often revokes the words of influential Haitian political journalist, Jean Dominique who once reassuringly told her, ““The Dyaspora are people with their feet planted in both worlds . . . There’s no need to be ashamed of that. There are more than a million of you. You all are not alone”” (*Create Dangerously* 51).

Danticat has also claimed her hybrid, diasporic perspective as an epistemological resource in terms of how this cultural in-betweenness benefits her writing:

It’s easier to see us as something foreign. But that’s great for a writer as you can’t be a complete insider . . . And maybe to write, it’s right that we are not seen as producers of national culture. I don’t think immigration is tragic for a writer. Suddenly you find yourself inside and outside a culture. It adds some nuance, some depth. Of course you lose some direct line to your culture, but distance can also give you another kind of eye with which to examine things. (Candelario 82)

While this quotation to some degree resonates with Salman Rushdie’s uncritical celebration of the migrant in *Imaginary Homelands*, Danticat’s understanding of her position seems more in line with Gloria Anzaldúa’s notion of *la frontera*/the borderland.

That is, rather than professing this between-worlds space as a valorized and privileged position, she frames it as a marginalized position that simultaneously lends itself to productive and creative effects.<sup>66</sup> Insofar as her position as Haitian immigrant blurs national allegiances, and beyond her affinity with Haitian cultural production, statements such as this make it difficult for her readerships to claim her as a writer working in the service of any one national project.

In addition to Danticat's geographical location, as suggested, another much debated aspect of her writing has been her decision to write in English. There are those who consider this choice a marker of her valuing the "American" over the "Haitian" part of her hyphenated identity. No doubt, the language in which one chooses to write, and therefore, make knowledge claims is never a neutral decision, especially when writing in the dominant language of English, a tongue closely connected to ongoing histories of conquest and oppression. But Danticat is herself quite aware of the linguistic "choices" she makes, and has addressed how writing in English is both necessity and compromise. Referring to English as her "stepmother tongue," she suggests:

you have a mother tongue and then an adopted language that you take on because your family circumstances have changed, sometimes not by your own choice. But I don't think of it as something ugly. I've always thought my relationship to language is precarious because in the first part of my life, I was balancing languages. As I was growing up, we spoke

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<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Danticat's position as migrant is far less privileged than that of Rushdie. With her extended Haitian family living in the rural, impoverished conditions of Bel Air and her father assuming the position of taxi driver in their Brooklyn neighborhood, Danticat's class positioning has not granted her the same migrant luxuries as those extended to postcolonial figures such as Salman Rushdie or Edward Said.

Creole at home, but when you go out, you speak French in the office, at the bank . . . French is the socially valid and accepted language, but then the people who speak Creole are not validated and in some way are being told their voice isn't heard. So I've always felt this dichotomy in language anyway. (Shea 387-388)

Speaking to how language is always circumscribed, and in some circumstances, determined by sociocultural conditions, Danticat calls attention to the simultaneous “foreignness” and intimacy involved in her relationship to English. At once the “step” that comes to stand in for her “mother” tongues (French, Creole), the distance/intimacy Danticat implies in the above quotation becomes embodied in her very usage of the term “stepmother”—an often tenuous, yet intimate relationship that becomes supplemental to the relationship with the mother. Never replacing it, and yet, forevermore complicating and, in many ways, enriching it, the relationship with the stepmother (tongue) paradoxically allows a critical distance and perspective on an originary relationship with the mother. It therefore offers the potentiality for further intimacy with both.

Equally as important, in this passage Danticat displaces romanticized and gendered configurations of her “mother” tongue(s) by highlighting how her originary tongues were never simple, or for that matter, singular. Rather, identifying French and Creole as “co-mothers” that competed for recognition, Danticat has stated that while uneasy, English allows her a vehicle to connect the oral and the written, the vernacular and the formal, in a way that her childhood languages did not: “So I wrote in a language I didn't speak regularly and spoke a language I couldn't write. When I came here [US]

and learned English, it was the first time I could write and speak the same language” (Lyons 189).

This bridging of the oral (Creole) and the written (French) through the vehicle of English seems central to Danticat’s ability to bring seemingly disparate voices and worldviews into conversation; by linking (public, private) spheres and geographical sites (national, regional) through the medium of language, Danticat attests to the importance of a living language that is able to cut across and through social registers while indirectly highlighting the arbitrariness of these imposed borders. And yet, her embrace of English, while displacing a romanticized view of her native languages, does not constitute a “break” with her connections to French and Creole. If anything her acquisition of English has furthered her appreciation of them as she suggests that the advantage of growing up in a bilingual country is that it raises your consciousness of the very uses to which language can be put (Lyons 189).

Danticat’s multilayered relation to language is further evidenced in her referral to all translations of her work as “retranslations.” In addition to shuttling between language systems in her mind and on the page Danticat suggests, “I always think of the translation as a retranslation because I am transferring an image in my head onto a page. Add to this the fact that my native language is not the one I am writing in and you also have another kind of translation” (Cadelario 84). These layers of translation (modal, linguistic, experiential, epistemological) importantly resonate with Gayatri Spivak’s “The Politics of Translation” in which she discusses the political and ethical dimensions of translation that determine the amount of “fraying” between the original and shadow: “By juggling the

disruptive rhetoricity that breaks the surface in not necessarily connected ways, we [translators] feel the selvedges of the language-textile give way, fray into *frayages* or facilitation” (180). While Spivak suggests there is always “risky fraying” (180) that underpins this act of translation (whether understood strictly in terms of language or more broadly in terms of cultural translations), similar to Danticat, she understands this “risk” as deserving when in line with an ethical commitment: ““What am I giving, or giving up? To whom am I giving by assuring that you don’t have to work that hard, just come and get it? What am I trying to promote?”” (187). By keeping these questions in her central line of vision, Danticat, like Spivak, attempts to negotiate linguistic representations that best serves her own agenda rather than that of the metropole.

By framing herself as a historically situated subject Danticat importantly reinforces how *any* language decision is imbued with political consequences and how perhaps more important than the specific language in which one writes is the intentionality that motivates this decision and the context from which this intentionality emerges. This intentionality is made transparent by the author herself. In her multiple interviews, Danticat speaks openly and deliberately about the various ways in which she uses language, most probably to complicate and problematize people’s own assumptions about the unidirectionality of (especially dominant) language(s): “People sometimes say to me, ‘Why do you write in English?’ It’s the circumstances of my life that led to this. If you grew up in the United States and ended up in Mexico and wrote in Spanish, is your doing that saying you are rejecting something else? It’s not to say that if you write in English, you don’t think Creole or French should be written in” (Shea 388). Danticat’s

points work to complicate the assumption that every immigrant has the skill set and opportunity to write in their originary tongue(s) as well as adopted languages, and highlights how this expectation fails to see that “choosing” which language to write in is a privilege that is not evenly distributed.

By “written in,” Danticat refers not only to her inclusion of French and Creole phrases added to the English, but also a *shadowing*, or echoing, of these languages *within* the English itself. Speaking to her language concerns when writing *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat suggests that there are “three languages in play—implied—in the novel: sometimes characters speak Spanish, sometimes in Creole, but it’s all in English” (Shea 388). Such language shadowing is also noted by Marie-José N’Zengou-Tayo who suggests that this approach allows Haitian sentiments to be cloaked in English “attire” (136).<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, N’Zengou-Tayo describes the “implicit presence of Creole underneath the English sentences” as manifesting itself “when the English sentence is *twisted* by the Haitian turn of phrase given to it” (136, my emphasis).<sup>68</sup>

Whatever the language we employ to describe the ways in which Danticat utilizes American English to register Haitian sentiments, epistemes, and phrasings—cloaking, shadowing, echoing, or “twisting”—all of these concepts resonate quite strongly with the

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<sup>67</sup> “Rewriting Folklore: Traditional Beliefs and Popular Culture in Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and *Krik? Krak!*.”

<sup>68</sup> N’Zengou-Tayo suggests that this Creoleness-of-phrase is most evident in dialogue with implied or specified Creole speakers which allows for their life experiences to enter into historical purview (136). One example given is in “The Missing Peace” in *Krik? Krak!* when the granddaughter informs the Haitian American visitor that “Intelligence is not only in reading and writing” (Danticat 111). N’Zengou-Tayo reads this as an English translation of the Creole “Pale franse pa vle di lespri,” which she translates back into English as “speaking French does not mean intelligence” (136). Furthermore, N’Zengou-Tayo reads Danticat’s slight alteration of the phrase as an example of cultural translation which “shifts the issue on the illiteracy problem in the Haitian countryside and allows for a better understanding of the social gap” (136-137). Although the original phrase’s obvious critique of the cultural capital that French continues to hold in a neocolonial Haitian social order is lost for English speakers unfamiliar with Creole, it allows its Haitian readership an added level of meaning and social critique.

notion of language as a social and political tool. Specifically in terms of the Haitian-American subset of the US audience and more generally in reference to the various immigrant groups within US borders, Danticat's English usage can be read as a bridging mechanism to bring together geographically and linguistically fragmented "minority" groups who do not find themselves represented in US print media, but whose various experiences might affectively resonate with the questions of identity and displacement Danticat's fiction explores. Danticat's English usage can also be read as a way of bridging the geographic and linguistic borders of the Caribbean islands, another community Danticat sees herself as a part of.

The unanticipated affects and potentialities of the connections that can be made through Danticat's English usage seem for her to outweigh the negative forms of appropriation and (mis)recognition that might result when disparate audiences encounter her work. Indeed, Danticat seeks to actively simplify how the complex politics of her language choices will be received through the brief clarification of direct address. For instance, in the postscript to her young adult first person fiction *Behind the Mountains*, she states, "What might seem odd is that even though the primary language of Haiti is Creole, this diary is written in English. However I would like you to imagine that Celiane wrote these words in her native tongue and that I am merely her translator" (166). Through this succinct authorial direction, Danticat at once informs her young readers that Haiti's national language is not in fact English, while instructing them to hear the echoes of Creole within Celiane's words.

In “Caribbean Women Writers and the Politics of Style: A Case for Literary Anancyism” Ifeona Fulani similarly understands Danticat’s usage of English as a political strategy that allows her to gain access to mainstream US publishing markets while creating positive representations of Caribbean cultures and opening up the market for other Caribbean women’s voices, thereby destabilizing extreme asymmetrical relations of power.<sup>69</sup> Concerned with the “the practice of ‘unhearing’ by influential individuals in the U.S. publishing industry” (64), Fulani writes the article to consider “strategies for countering and overcoming the publishing industry’s deafness to [Caribbean women’s] voices” (65). Fulani directly identifies the challenge of finding a large enough audience for written literature within the Caribbean when oral culture (radio, song) is privileged over the written (68), and therefore understands diasporic Caribbean writers who move to Canada, the United States, or England to be doing so out of economic necessity (66). Central to Fulani’s discussion is the story of “Anancy and the Sky God,” an Ashanti tale in which a spider (Anancy) tries to get back all of the stories of the world that the Sky God has claimed for his own enjoyment. Fulani explains:

The wily spider yearns to get his hands on the stories, partly out of malice for the Sky God, partly out of a sense of injustice, partly for his own advantage. Initially, none of his schemes achieve the desired result, so he turns for help to his wife, Aso. With her assistance, Anancy strikes a deal with the Sky God, who promises to release the captive stories in return for

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<sup>69</sup> Danticat’s edited volume of Haitian American writings, *The Butterfly’s Way*, certainly speaks to this point.

a python, a real fairy, and forty-seven stinging hornets. Anancy employs all the trickery in his repertoire and keeps his side of the impossible bargain, to the surprise and chagrin of the Sky God, who reluctantly releases the stories. Anancy takes the stories back to his village and organizes a festival so that the whole community can share and enjoy the wealth of stories. (78)<sup>70</sup>

Danticat's writing, then, for Fulani is an example of her theory of "anancyism" which she describes as:

a model of subtle and perspicacious strategizing . . . Anancy displays characteristics in common with the ex-isled figure . . . capable both of dwelling inside society, all the better to view and access objectively . . . Anancy is the signifyin(g) spider who, in the continuous spinning of his web, tests the limits of language in a perpetual 'discourse of trickery.' In this manifestation Anancy is a potent emblem for the Caribbean writer at large in the United States. A writer in this outsider/insider position is as liminal a figure as Anancy, necessitating quick-wittedness and perspicacity . . . and persistence in plying her trade—weaving her web of stories. (69)

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<sup>70</sup> I'm struck by how Ngugi's description of the third interpreter in "The Allegory of the Cave" resonates with Fulani's description of Anancy taking the stories back to his village for the community to share. While there is no easy way to "prove" that Danticat herself acts as this type of third interpreter, giving back to the community under Ngugi's rubric, I certainly read her as such. In addition to the points Fulani makes, I think that Danticat's own excitement over the French translation of *Krik? Krak!* and the Creole renditions of her work on Haitian radio (Candelario 84) speak to her desire to have her words reach and affect Haitian audiences.

Reminiscent of Danticat's own description of how her diasporic identity marks her as an insider/outsider, and identifying the US publishing industry as the modern day cultural colonizers for Caribbean writers trying to become published, Fulani recognizes subtle language manipulations and negotiations as central strategies for "outsmarting" these contemporary "sky gods." Speaking specifically of Danticat, Fulani suggests that "with an ease that invokes Anancy," Danticat "inhabits at least three literary identities: to those who would mainstream her, she is American; she is Haitian American to the multiculturalists; and to the Haitian- and Caribbean-based audience, she is simply Haitian" (75).

To be sure, it is the multilingual and multiplicitous narrative strategies of her work that enable Danticat to simultaneously inhabit these various writerly identities and allegiances. Whether any one is Danticat's "proper" audience (which Fulani reads as the Haitian/Caribbean one) is confounded by Danticat's claiming of the "tenth department" and her concept of diaspora as a floating homeland. By hybridizing her linguistic choices, and straddling several language systems, Danticat carves out for herself a representational fluidity that is fearless and expansive, and capable of representing *linguistically* the *cultural* complexities that her diasporic positioning enables her to see. One aspect of Danticat's writing that Fulani does not touch on, but that very much points to which audiences and epistemes she is primarily concerned with representing (even if these are not her "primary audiences" in quantifiable terms), is the decidedly oral quality her work possesses. It is this orality, and its gendered dimensions within Danticat's corpus, that I turn to in the next section.

*'Storytelling' the Archive: Oraliture, Kitchen Poets, and Women's Cultural Transmission in Danticat's "Fake-lore"*

"Are there women who both cook and write? Kitchen poets, they call them. They slip phrases in their stew and wrap meaning around their pork before frying it . . . When you write, it's like braiding your hair. Taking a handful of coarse unruly strands and attempting to bring them unity. Your fingers have still not perfected the task. Some of the braids are long, others are short. Some are thick, others thin. Some are heavy. Others are light. Like the diverse women in your family. Those whose fables and metaphors, whose similes, and soliloquies, whose diction and *je ne sais quoi* daily slip into your survival soup, by way of their fingers." ~Edwidge Danticat, "Epilogue: Women Like Us," *Krik? Krak!*

In Caribbean theoretician Edouard Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* he suggests it is "an oralizing of the written" that most directly points to a Caribbean aesthetics (*CD* 244). Furthermore, Glissant suggests that the term "oraliture" is itself a recent Haitian neologism that indicates an insistence on remaining within "the realm of the "oral" (*CD* 188).<sup>71</sup> Orality is present not only in the occasional Creole turn of phrases that "twist" her English sentences, but in her very discussions of her writing. When asked in interviews to describe the way she sees herself as an artist, Danticat repeatedly responds by insisting that she is a "storyteller," or one who tells stories (Capshaw Smith 197). This response is a subtle, yet significant distinction from the usually claimed title of "writer," one which privileges the written in its very semantic construct. Indeed, the oral residue of "storyteller" enhances the significance of the title of her short story collection, *Krik? Krak!* (discussed at length in the following section) and its allegiance to an active form of storytelling session that suggests both a willing and accountable teller and listener/audience.

Danticat first introduces this form of storytelling in the opening story of the collection, "Children of the Sea." Recounting the sea voyage of political Haitian

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<sup>71</sup> Closely connected to the concept of "oraliture," Glissant defines "oral literature" as "a text that was meant first and foremost to be read aloud and that could benefit from the techniques of oral expression" (*CD* 188).

refugees in the early nineties, the narrator of the story writes: “We spent most of yesterday telling stories. Someone says, Krik? You answer, Krak! And they say, I have many stories I could tell you, and then they go on and tell these stories to you, but mostly to themselves” (14). Given the dire circumstances of the situation and the narrator’s assertion that these stories are told “mostly to [the tellers] themselves” (14), it becomes clear that for Danticat and the characters she writes, storytelling is understood as a mode of survival, a way to ensure one’s existence and to save one’s life; a truth that closely resounds with the *griyo/istwa* paradigm articulated by the Haitian storytellers in Bell’s *Walking on Fire*.

As my project recaps at length, the paradigm of “storytelling as survival” is not only echoed by a number of U.S. women of color feminists who compellingly argue that to tell one’s story is to radically resist cultural silencing, but also resounds with a fundamental tenet of the testimonio ethos.<sup>72</sup> Within Danticat’s corpus, as with testimonio more generally, to bear witness to the speakers’ stories becomes framed as an ethical act, one that pays credence to the humanity of the speaker in the face of dehumanizing conditions. It is no accident that it is through a culturally resonant call/response framework through which readers are introduced to the collection. Danticat’s tactical decision to anticipatorily frame the collection around the concept of “Krik? Krak!” speaks to the terms through which she hopes her stories will be read and engaged. Based on this understanding of writer and reader, storyteller and witness, Danticat offers a collection that attests to the vitality and richness of Haitian culture in the face of colonial, political, and economic struggle that she accomplishes through her exploration of the

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<sup>72</sup> This sentiment is directly voiced in Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory.”

cultural, epistemological, and historical circumstances that circumscribe the life stories of her characters.

Beyond this, it is telling of Danticat's underlying feminist politics that it is most often the women in her stories who undergo the (cultural, political) work of storytelling. By linking together the lives of several individual women across temporal, geographic, classed, generational, and epistemological borders Danticat importantly enables readers to imagine a divergent landscape of the lives of past and present Haitian women, all the while connecting them through themes of kinship (not necessarily related to bloodlines), interdependency, and in many instances, mutual respect. In Denise R Shaw's "Textual Healing: Giving Voice to Historical and Personal Experience in the Collective Works of Edwidge Danticat," she conceives of Haitian women's rich oral tradition as a central tool employed by Danticat in all of her works (2). This is performed in *Krik? Krak!* in which the short story collection's variegated panorama importantly anticipates and contests neocolonial impulses to "know" Haitian people and culture through a homogenizing lens while celebrating the lives of Haitian and Haitian American women and resisting a superficial romanticization of such an imagined community. As Danticat reminds us through her historically rooted narratives, it is precisely because of the ugly, encompassing gendered dimensions of colonial, economic, and class violence that such a community of women is forged.

If the opening story of *Krik? Krak!*, offers insight on the epistemological importance of storytelling in Haitian culture in general, then the ethical, spiritual, and gendered elements present in this form of oral, embodied storytelling are most powerfully

articulated in the collection's epilogue, entitled "Women Like Us." In remembrance of and in dedication to all of the narrator's kinswomen (especially those from generations past), whom she refers to as "kitchen poets,"<sup>73</sup> the narrator reflects on how she has only come to writing through their stories that call out to her and connect her to them:

Kitchen poets, you call them . . . These women, they ask for your voice so that they could tell your mother in your place that yes, women like you do speak, even if they speak in a tongue that is hard to understand. Even if it's patois, dialect, Creole . . . Most of the women in your life had their heads down. They would wake up one morning to find their panties gone. It is not shame, however, that kept their heads down. They were singing, searching for meaning in the dust. And sometimes, they were talking to faces across the ages, faces like yours and mine. You thought that if you didn't tell the stories, the sky would fall on your head . . . You have never been able to escape the pounding of a thousand other hearts that have outlived you by thousands of years. Over the years when you have needed us, you have always cried, 'Krik?' and we have answered 'Krak!' and it has shown us that you have not forgotten us . . . You remember thinking while braiding your hair that you look a lot like your mother. Your mother, who looked like your grandmother and her grandmother before her . . . When she was done she would ask you to name each braid after those nine hundred and ninety-nine women who were boiling in your blood, and since you had written them down and memorized them, the

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<sup>73</sup> Itself a nod to kinswoman Paule Marshall whom Danticat deems "the greatest kitchen poet of all" (227).

names would come rolling off your tongue. And this was your testament to the way that these women lived and died and lived again. (222-224)

It is not a stretch to consider this multifaceted and poetic epilogue as representative of Danticat's own personal manifesto on what propels her to write, and how she considers her writing to be in the service of her kinswomen; as an exercise in historical collective meaning making.

By rooting herself and her work in the lives of ordinary Haitian women, of those whose social knowledge is intimately connected to the domestic sphere, Danticat's encoding of them as "kitchen poets" instills them with a level of critical agency and dignity that is reminiscent of Aurora Levins Morales's suggestion of testimonio existing as "making theory out of the stuff in our pockets, out of the stories, incidents, dreams, frustrations that were never acceptable anywhere else" ("Organic Intellectual" 32). Her theoretical reflections are also deliberately counterbalanced and heavily interwoven with the embodied domestic and ritualistic imagery of cooking and hair braiding. Indeed, the figure of the kitchen poet more broadly resonates with U.S. Women of Color feminists' reclamation of "kitchen table theorizing" (as most notably encapsulated by the feminist Kitchen Table Press), and of valuing knowledge in the vernacular; as claiming the domestic an important site of collective meaning making even if and when it is not recognized as knowledge "proper." While the narrative voice articulates her mother's disappointment in her writing habit, this extended reflection highlights how writing for her is not a way "out," as a marker of social status meant to disavow the domestic lives of the women who came before her, but rather to pay tribute to their legacy. While it is

Danticat's individual voice that comes through her writings, as her storylines highlight, she lends her voice to those women who have been historically silenced not only by masculinist and imperial histories, but also by other women ("they ask for your voice so that they could tell your mother in your place that yes, women like you do speak, even if they speak in a tongue that is hard to understand").

Danticat's impetus to write is not defined by a need to "give women a voice." Rather, this need to storytell is framed as something bigger than herself: "[t]hese women, they ask for your voice." Danticat therefore articulates her investment in cultural representation as a mode of accountability, and as a way of legitimizing the lives of ordinary Haitian women and the unique knowledge and perspectives their social locations afford. This is what she means by the passage: "Most of the women in your life had their heads down. They would wake up one morning to find their panties gone. It is not shame, however, that kept their heads down. They were singing, searching for meaning in the dust. And sometimes, they were talking to faces across the ages, faces like yours and mine." Immediately, this passage strongly resounds with *Walking on Fire*, and Bell's authorial direction to look beyond the material poverty in which the *griyos* find themselves in order to better see their strength and resistances to imposed social oppressions.

And yet, Danticat importantly pushes past this to suggest that while these women may be poor in material, "real" ways, their inner worlds and epistemes enable them to exist outside of these material concerns. That beyond the confines of imposed poverty, gendered social scripts, and even beyond the material world, these women operate in

epistememes that connect them to a collective unconscious, and which necessarily disrupt the temporality of chronological time measurements. In this way, Danticat extends the reach of the reflections of Strejilevich, Kozameh, and Mootoo on the notion of a “living past.” The belief in a collective unconscious that reaches across and through intergenerational kinship connections critiques the binaries of past/present, individual/collective at a fundamental level, and Danticat’s careful attention to this allows for an expansive understanding of the epistemological relevance of interpretive communities and the possibilities of collective meaning making. If the archive is something understood as within you (“those nine hundred and ninety-nine women who were boiling in your blood”), or as handed down through the oral stories that accompany cooking and hair braiding—rather than something located outside of you in the form of written historical record—one’s sense of social responsibility must also shift from an autonomous to collective accountability.

This is why Danticat positions her writing as a parallel to—rather than betrayal of—the traditional ritualized cultural transmissions of cooking, braiding, and oral tale-telling, and as a skill that best enables her to listen to, tell the stories, and name the voices of the “nine hundred and ninety-nine women who were boiling in [her] blood.” Writing for Danticat is therefore undertaken as an ethical communal and political act, as she pens the oral knowledge of her kinswomen into a formal narration that literally writes their lives back into history. Through the unpleasantly cacophonous phrase, “You have never been able to escape the pounding of a thousand other hearts that have outlived you by

thousands of years,” she illustrates how these women’s stories will not leave her alone; that they must be told for her to understand her own.

This relationality is tellingly marked by an important shift in narrative voice that decenters the initial first person “I” of the narrator to the third person “you” as her kinswomen speak through her and her writing. This relationship between the dead and the living becomes a fluid, mutual exchange that is difficult and laden with tremendous responsibility; it is hard, it is a struggle. There is no escaping “the pounding of a thousand other hearts,” of these women’s life stories “boiling” in her blood, except to write them. To write their stories is also to write herself, to know herself through them, and to testify to the meaning of their lives through their ability to give meaning to her own memory work. While their lives are no doubt translated through Danticat’s interpretive frame, her own interpretive frame is no doubt affected in her efforts to translate their lives in story form. It is therefore also the decidedly collective testimonial quality in this passage that further dramatizes the ethical component in the hearing and telling of Danticat’s stories. The teller(s) relies upon the listener(s) to hear—and thus recognize their stories—as much as to understand and verify the presence of the self. By “hearing,” the narrative voice suggests that she must change the way she listens, a perhaps subtle directive to readers themselves. In order to properly pay respect to the importance of oral culture to Haitian women, and to find meaning through relationships and epistemes outside of what comes to be deemed socially acceptable or possible, the narrator must interrogate and alter her own worldview to account for the truths of the women for whom she writes.

As Shaw suggests, elements of testimonial are repeated throughout Danticat's corpus as a way of producing "a narrative space [that] allows readers to participate as witnesses to collective and individual atrocities that have shaped the imagination of Haitian writers" (12). Shaw's claim closely resonates with Fulani's suggestion that sympathy and affect remain two central strategies in Danticat's anancyism, strategies by which she "gain[s] access to the imagination of the non-Haitian, non-Caribbean reader, and enter[s] the American imagination" (77). And yet, the utilization of a testimonial frame does not mean that Danticat does not find her own creative autonomy within its sphere, or take her own imaginative liberties in writing this gendered archive. Rather, Danticat herself refers to many of her women-focused folkloric evocations as "fake-lore," "self-created folklore . . . hybrid and *métisse* warm-weather daffodils" (*Create Dangerously* 68). And it is no wonder; Danticat's work specifically focuses on the lives of Haitian and Haitian American women whose life stories continue to be silenced through masculinist renderings of Haitian and Caribbean histories. If anything is sacred in Danticat's work, it is the communities of women that remain the centerpieces for her stories. By testifying to the beauty, strength, and existence of their lives and beliefs, Danticat positions her women characters in close relation to the asymmetrical power relations (within and without Haiti's borders) that often serve to discount and erase their experiences.

But as much as these women-centered narratives represent sources of support and healing in Danticat's work, they are also importantly marked by (generational, class, regional, epistemological) struggle; the disparate social positionings and belief systems of

individual women characters at times collide and compete for recognition and validity. These distinct voices and perspectives straddle ideological and epistemological divides, enabling a polyvocal quality that Danticat masterfully utilizes to bring different voices into productive proximity. Through such thematic explorations, the variegated and affective qualities of Danticat's fiction gain their political power, a feminist impetus that once again illustrates how the personal is political, and to which I now turn through an extended discussion of *Krik? Krak!*.

*Polyvocal Narration as Collective Meaning Making in Krik? Krak!*

“But another thing that has always haunted and obsessed me is trying to write the things that have always haunted and obsessed those who came before me.”

“Grappling with memory is, I believe one of many complicated Haitian obsessions. We have, it seems, a collective agreement to remember our triumphs and gloss over our failures . . . we cultivate cycles that we never see coming until we are reliving similar horrors.”

~Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*

Thematically, Danticat has consistently written of the continuing influence of French colonialism in the daily lives of Haitian citizens, as well as the ways in which U.S.-Haitian relations affect Haitian politics and the marginalized status of Haitian American immigrants within US borders. In addition to her highly effective uses of sympathy and affect are the multilayered and intricately explored snapshots of her Haitian and Haitian American characters and the sociohistorical relations that circumscribe their lives. Danticat's ability to hold the tensions arising between individual and larger structural relations in such close proximity is what gives such power to her work. The complex, debilitating, and ongoing affects of these (neo)colonial relationships are often dramatized in the crevices of her characters' personal lives, including through their relationships to language.

*Krik? Krak!* is a short story collection that ambitiously spans an array of temporal, historical, geographical, and sociocultural positionings in addition to its highly varied narrative styles. Opening with a heart-wrenching epistolary exchange that documents the unsent letters written between two young lovers who become separated as a result of the US assisted coup that removed Aristide from power in the early 1990's<sup>74</sup> and ending with the story of a Brooklyn-based Haitian American family whose members continue to struggle with often conflicting cultural viewpoints despite their having lived in the U.S. for a number of years, *Krik? Krak!* delicately balances these forms of extreme geographical and epistemological displacement with stories "rooted" in the rural Haitian village of Ville Rose, a physical space that serves to connect the lives and stories of the generations of women that permeate Danticat's text.<sup>75</sup>

But if Ville Rose serves as a focal point around which to develop the interrelated and intergenerational stories within her collection, the constancy of this space is offset by Danticat's temporal disruptions. Refusing a teleological model of history, Danticat instead weaves in and out of historically marked, but otherwise unspecified time periods in which the reader is forced to rely upon his or her own knowledge of Haitian history and to *listen* for the interconnections between the stories to reconfigure a chronological mapping of events and voices. For example, in "Between the Pool and the Gardenias"

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<sup>74</sup> This passage also eerily echoes the experiences of the enslaved crossing the Atlantic in the Middle Passage as the young lover flees Haiti via boat to avoid political persecution.

<sup>75</sup> In an interview with Bonnie Lyons, Danticat stresses the importance of place to identity in rural Haitian families. She suggests that when someone from the city is asked where he or she is going when headed to see family, a typical response is, "I am going to my country." Danticat tells Lyons that "the rural area is like a country within a country," wherein everybody "Traces his or her family to some particular village" (186). As such, Danticat's representation of the centrality of village and ancestry to Haitians furthers the importance of her juxtaposing stories of extreme displacement with a number of stories centered on Ville Rose in different time periods in *Krik? Krak!*.

(the fifth story in the collection) we discover that the narrator is the granddaughter of Défilé, a character in the collection's second story ("Nineteen Thirty-Seven") and the goddaughter of Lili, the mother in "A Wall of Fire Rising" (the third story in the collection) which highlights the centrality of intergenerational and familial relationships in Danticat's work (94).<sup>76</sup> For the characters within the text, the interrelations with one's kinswomen becomes as—if not more—important a way of understanding the passage of time as chronological units. One notable exception to this is the story entitled "Nineteen Thirty-Seven" which centers on the Trujillo massacre that violently expelled all Haitians from the Dominican Republic. The exact historical location of this narrative thus establishes a time frame from which to further understand when the other stories are taking place.

Time for Danticat is never just in the here and now, but always in profound resonance with the echoes of history, allowing her to make implicit connections that comment on cultural and historical crosscurrents and interdependencies. One pointed example of this is in "The Children of the Sea" when the exiled narrator makes continual reference to the Middle Passage and his African ancestors: "I feel like we are sailing for Africa. Maybe we will go to Guinin,<sup>77</sup> to live with the spirits, to be with everyone who has come and has died before us" (14); "Do you want to know how people go to the bathroom on the boat? Probably the same way they did on those slave ships years ago"

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<sup>76</sup> It is also through this strategy that we come to know more about the characters than the individual stories allow for, adding further roundness to their lives.

<sup>77</sup> Guinin represents a spiritual place in Vodou, an Africa (as homeland) under the ocean. As Danticat describes it, "Ginen stands in for all of Africa, renaming with the moniker of one country in an ideological continent which, if it cannot welcome the returning bodies of its lost children, is more than happy to welcome back their spirits" (*Create Dangerously* 134).

(15). Similarly, in “The Wall of Fire Rising,” Danticat highlights the parallels between Haiti under French colonial rule and the neocolonial economic relations that continue to impoverish Haiti and its people. When Guy’s seven-year-old son is cast as Dutty Boukman (a symbol of revolution and Haitian independence) in the school play, Guy becomes affected by the power of the speech: “[he] felt as though for a moment they had been given the rare pleasure of hearing the voice of one of the forefathers of Haitian independence in the forced baritone of their only child” (57) even while it “was obvious that this was a speech written by a European man, who gave to the slave revolutionary Boukman the kind of European phrasing that might have sent the real Boukman turning in his grave” (56).

Throughout the story, the power of the speech haunts Guy and reminds him of his inability to attain regular, profitable work. It is when he is finally granted a day’s work at the local sugar mill that Guy is able to express outrage and despair towards his living situation: “‘I was born in the shadow of that sugar mill,’ Guy said. ‘Probably the first thing my mother gave me to drink as a baby was some sweet water tea from the pulp of the sugarcane. If anyone deserves to work there, I should’” (66). Instead, Guy remains “number seventy-eight on the permanent hire list” (66), a reality that influences his suicide. Danticat ends the story by explicitly linking Guy’s fate with the fate of the enslaved in the Haitian revolution as Guy’s son recites the line from Boukman’s speech, “*we shall all let out one piercing cry that we may either live freely or we should die*” (80).

In addition to the collection's commentary on Haiti's history of slavery and French colonialism, Danticat has spoken of her particular investment in speaking to historical relations between Haiti and the US:

I want the readers, both Haitian and American kids of other backgrounds, to understand that there have been times before when Haitian and American history have intersected. A lot of kids don't know that. I hope to change the way the reader defines Haiti as well as the way he or she defines America, to let them know that indeed Haitian-Americans have earned themselves a place here. We've not only taken from this country, but we've given a lot of ourselves as well. (Capshaw Smith 103)

For Danticat, it is not only important for her readers to gain a more historically grounded understanding of Haiti and its challenges, but also for readers to re-envision the position of Haitian Americans within the US cultural imagination. The closing stories of the collection, "New York Day Women" and "Caroline's Wedding" offer plenty of material for commentary on the marginalized positioning of Haitian American immigrant families in the US.

For instance, in "New York Day Women" the reader is positioned to hear the narrator's thoughts as she secretly follows her mother around the streets, expressing her disorientation as she watches her perform the role of caretaker while also "peering into Chanel and Tiffany's" that mark the affluent neighborhood in which she works (145). Bewildered, all the narrator can offer is, "[m]y mother never shops outside of Brooklyn" (145). And yet, here her mother is, walking around with a child in her care and meeting

up with “a group of women who are taking other people’s children on an afternoon outing,” a spectacle the narrator likens to a “Third World Parent-Teacher Association meeting” (152). Through the narrative we also come to learn that the narrator’s father is a taxi driver (a parallel to Danticat’s own father). Similarly, in “Caroline’s Wedding” we learn that Caroline’s Bahamian fiancé is a janitor (182), and that both the narrator and Caroline are ESL teachers to Haitian students (182).

With all of these characters working within different aspects of the service sector, Danticat importantly calls attention to the ways in which Haitian Americans—and Caribbean immigrants more broadly—are folded in to the U.S. economy by working low wage, no benefit positions that offer little possibility for the upward mobility heralded by the American dream. As a character offhandedly remarks in “Caroline’s Wedding,” “In New York, women give their eight hours to the white man . . . No one has time to be cradling no other man” (166). This sentiment, perhaps more than any other seems to signify what Danticat means when she speaks to her desire for the American readership to recognize how Haitian Americans have not just “taken from this country, but we’ve given a lot of ourselves as well” (Capshaw Smith 103). The personal and economic sacrifices involved in the lives of recent American immigrants gain affective currency through Danticat’s nuanced, humorous, and understated portrayal of her character’s daily lives.

It is not just the presence of Haitians in the U.S. that permeates Danticat’s texts, but importantly, a U.S. presence in Haiti as well. For instance, in “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” when the narrator visits her mother in prison she comments on how “The yellow

prison building was like a fort, as large and strong as in the days when it was used by the American marines who had built it. The Americans taught us how to build prisons. By the end of the 1915 occupation, the police in the city really knew how to hold human beings trapped in cages, even women like Manman who was accused of having wings of flame” (35). Specifically citing the 1915 U.S. occupation as evidence of where U.S. and Haitian histories have previously intersected, Danticat utilizes the physical presence of the prison building to figurative effect to comment on the continued effects (structural, physical, and epistemological) of U.S. military interventions on the Haitian people. Indeed, the internalized colonial mindset of the police who learn from the U.S. military “how to hold human beings trapped in cages” pointedly speaks to the devastating psychic effects of the U.S. presence. In connecting the effects of the U.S. occupation to “women like Manman” who have been “accused” of practicing Vodou, Danticat also addresses the gendered and spiritual dimensions of this violence, especially the suspicion towards the spiritual practices of Haitian women that fall outside of U.S. intelligible belief systems.

But Danticat also addresses U.S.-Haitian intersections through personal relationships. In “The Missing Peace,” the narrator is a young teenage girl living in Ville Rose with her grandmother who rents rooms out to boarders. Set at the collapse of the Duvalier regime, the narrator—whose name shifts from “Lamort” (death) to Marie Magdalène within the story—tells us how many of their boarders were “French and American journalists who wanted to take pictures of the churchyard where you could see dead bodies” (106). Here, Danticat takes aim at the fascination with representing the “bare life” conditions in Haiti from the colonial powers that directly affected the situation

of political unrest by highlighting how forms of epistemic violence (perpetuated through the media spectacle) have outlasted physical occupations of France and the United States. And yet Danticat complicates the story by blurring national (U.S.-Haitian) borders through an exploration of their messiness in the personal lives of her characters.

The story itself centers on the exchanges between Marie Magdalène and a Haitian American boarder, Emilie. Emilie is visiting Haiti to find her mother, a journalist under the Duvalier regime who has gone missing. While Marie Magdalène is at first intimidated by Emilie's American accent and attire, it is Emilie who becomes dependent upon the formally illiterate narrator for her knowledge of the *coup* and where the bodies have been taken. As they converse in Creole Emilie tells Marie, "[a]t your age, you already have a wide reputation. I have a journalist friend who has stayed in this house. He told me you are the only person who would take me to the yard" (115). The respect they earn for each other throughout their encounter is enhanced through their situation as motherless daughters. In the tense circumstances in which they encounter each other, Danticat offers their forged friendship as an instance of human connection in the midst of dehumanizing conditions and in spite of national borders. Furthermore, Danticat importantly counters the narrative of domestic Haitians as dependent upon their more privileged Haitian American relations for economic survival, since in a very real way Marie Magdalène saves Emilie's life after a confrontation with area soldiers.

As the above examples illustrate, *Krik? Krak!* represents Haitians and Haitian Americans in different cultural and personal moments and positionings, and in so doing challenges notions of "identity" and "culture" as sets of fixed and pre-given attributes.

Rather, culture is presented as a site of creative resistance and struggle marked by violent occupations and governments (arising from inter- and intra-national conflicts) as often as it is explored through epistemological differences between characters (which are in turn marked as much by generational, regional, and political differences as by those on national and cultural fronts). One central way in which Danticat addresses such cultural negotiations is through her characters' differing relations to Vodou—a Haitian religion marked by violent cultural struggle and compromised synthesis in the convergence of Catholic and West African belief systems under the colonial plantation system. Vodou is a constant presence in *Krik? Krak!*, at times referenced implicitly (suggesting the reader's assumed familiarity with Vodou rites and beliefs), at others overtly discussed. Tellingly, it is in reference to the characters who practice Vodou that it is discussed without the need for explanation, suggesting Danticat's dedication to de-centering Western epistemes and centralizing the voices of differently positioned Haitian women.<sup>78</sup>

For instance, in “Between the Pool and the Gardenias” the narrator, a young servant, finds a dead infant whom she names Rose:

At first I was afraid to touch her . . . She might have been some kind of *wanga*, a charm sent to trap me. My enemies were many and crafty. The girls who slept with my husband while I was still grieving over my miscarriages. They might have sent that vision of loveliness to blind me so that I would never find my way back to the place that I yanked out my

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<sup>78</sup> For an excellent discussion of the ways in which Danticat both incorporates and re-tells aspects of Haitian folklore and Vodou, see Jana Evans Braziel. “Défilée’s Diasporic Daughters: Revolutionary Narratives of Ayiti (Haiti), Nanchon (Nation), and Dyaspora (Diaspora) in Edwidge Danticat’s *Krik? Krak!*. *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37:2 (2004): 77-98.

head when I got on that broken down minibus and left my village months ago. (92)

Rather than just seeing a dead infant in front of her, the narrator strives to make sense of it, understanding its presence as a sign because she interprets the situation from within a Vodou episteme. At first, the narrator is wary of the infant, afraid that she might be a “*wanga*,” a trick, a reaction that seems justified given the recent circumstances that have brought her to the city to work as a servant. Eventually, however, the narrator interprets Rose as a gift from her kinswomen: “I always knew they would come back and claim me to do some good for somebody. Maybe I was to do some good for this child” (95). Looking for meaning through the infant, the narrator reads this gift as evidence of her kinswomen wanting to reduce the pain she has experienced through her multiple miscarriages.

It is important to note how Danticat intentionally positions the reader to occupy the perspective of this female Vodou believer, to see the world through her eyes. In so doing, she demystifies the religion as “black magic” and instead positions it as what it is: a way of understanding, a way of making sense of the world. While Danticat is certainly not the first to decolonize narratives surrounding Vodou epistemes, it is critical that she does so through the first person narration of an underclass woman servant whose life perspectives would otherwise remain invisible. Indeed, after Danticat has established the readers’ affinity with the character, we hear her employers cruelly mocking her for her beliefs:

‘She is probably one of those *manbos*,’ they say when my back is turned.  
‘She’s probably one of those stupid people who think that they have a  
spell to make themselves invisible and hurt other people. Why can’t none  
of them get a spell to make themselves rich? It’s that voodoo nonsense  
that’s holding us Haitians back.’ (95)

The classist, regionalist comments made by her employers reflect a bourgeois mentality that positions poor, rural Haitians and their belief systems as what is standing in the way of Haitian progress and rationality. By devaluing the narrator and those who follow Vodou, Danticat illustrates how culture is a constant site of negotiation between people who see the world in fundamentally different ways, and how one’s social position and aspirations significantly affect one’s worldview.

But such ideas of Vodou as mere “silliness” are not always addressed in such hostile ways by Danticat’s characters. In “Caroline’s Wedding,” for instance, the Haitian American narrator pokes fun at her mother for thinking that her bone soup would “cure” her sister, Caroline, of her love for her fiancé, Eric. The sisters joke about their mother’s belief that the soup can affect anything, and an exasperated Caroline humorously suggests that “[i]f she keeps making this soup . . . I will dip my head into the pot and scald myself blind. That will show her that there’s no magic in it” (160). Caroline’s mother, for her part, retorts, “You think you are so American . . . You don’t know what’s good for you. You have no taste buds. A double tragedy” (160).

These intergenerational relationships—marked by negotiations between American and Haitian belief systems frequently played out between mothers and daughters—while

at times strained from their inability to see life from another perspective, nonetheless demonstrate a lightheartedness and generosity that allows the characters to lovingly put up with each other's different world views. In many cases, the younger generations who at first understand their mothers' abidance to Vodou as silly or ignorant come to a place of respect, if not belief, for Vodou themselves. While for the daughter in "Caroline's Wedding" this takes the form of recognizing Vodou as rich cultural folklore, other characters undergo a significant shift in their worldview.

For instance, in the story "Nineteen Thirty-Seven," the narrator goes to visit her imprisoned mother in Port-Au-Prince. The story is laden with Vodou symbols from the Madonna figure (a symbol of the spirit *Erzulie*) that opens the story to how the prison guards think the mother has been mounted by an *lwa* (spirits who take over human bodies). From the removed way the narrator discusses "accusations" of her mother being inhabited by an *lwa* and the river ceremonies her mother performed as she was growing up, it is clear that the daughter is uncomfortable with such ideas. In the second half of the story, however, we recognize a definite shift in perspective when she asks her mother, "Manman, did you fly?" (43). To which her mother responds, "'Oh, now you talk,' she said, 'when I am nearly gone. Perhaps you don't remember. All the women who came with us to the river, they could go to the moon and back if that is what they wanted'" (43).

The intimacy of this exchange between the mother and daughter highlights the importance of the oral in passing down stories, knowledge, and beliefs from generation to generation, particularly between women. The daughter's cautious question speaks to her desire to understand her mother's life from her mother's perspective—not just from the

perspective of the male authorities who jail her mother for her beliefs—and yet her mother’s melancholic response speaks to the limited knowledge she can pass on to her daughter this late in life, and given the state of her failing body. Still, as the daughter leaves, she is flooded by repressed memories of the river ceremonies that were so central to her mother, and she in turn performs an aspect of this ritual when a woman claiming to know her through these river rituals brings news of her mother’s death. The shift in the daughter’s perspective of what constitutes knowing fundamentally alters the way that she understands the “accusations” of her mother as ridden by an *lwa*. Whereas she earlier dismisses the guards’ claims that her mother could fly, upon hearing of her mother’s death she uninhibitedly responds, “Let her flight be joyful” (49). The narrator’s desire to understand her mother’s life beyond the limited perspective of legal and Western bias suggests that this shift in perspective will influence not only how she understands her mother’s life, but also how she understands her own.

As explored through Danticat’s self-coined “fake-lore,” the polyvocal testimonial quality of *Krik? Krak!* reinforces the importance of interpretive communities, and how the fragmented perspectives gleaned through interpersonal relations necessarily complicate one-dimensional claims to historical truth. It is through the social heterogeneity and resulting internal tensions articulated through her richly textured storyscape that Danticat reinforces the plurality of truth and suggests that social truths come from a historically and politically situated somewhere, without fixing the meanings of these locations. The multiple competing perspectives that come to be voiced in the collection produce a similar effect to polyvocal activist women’s testimonios, and

importantly complicate essentialized notions of “Haitian culture.” Additionally, in claiming the “tenth department,” Danticat allows room for diverse readerships to learn from her representation-based analyses. Metronormative and classist Haitian views are taken to task with as much clarity and bite as are U.S. imperial policies and racialized economies.

These critiques of less than productive Haitian social norms do not detract from Danticat’s efforts to represent and celebrate the critical agency of the lives of ordinary Haitian women. Rather, these efforts importantly exist side-by-side; critique is never offered without offering a social alternative. Insofar as she forms critiques *of* social inequities, so does she perform painstaking memory and dream work to carve out rich representational paradigms to argue *for* the resilience of Haitian women, and the better worlds they imagine for themselves.

The short story cycles *Krik? Krak!* and *The Dew Breaker* illustrate Danticat’s dedication to representing the many faces of social truths, and the ways that social knowledge can only be forged by grappling with multiple perspectives and social locations. However, these fragmented narrative structures are not the only polyvocal frameworks she utilizes to highlight this point. The next chapter turns attention to *Behind the Mountains* and *Brother, I’m Dying* to discuss how Danticat recognizes the necessity of working across not only linguistic and epistemic registers, but narrative registers as well.

**Chapter Eleven: Reaching Across Genres, Reaching Across Readerships:  
Diversifying the Social Reach of Haitian American Immigration Stories Through  
*Behind the Mountains* and *Brother, I’m Dying***

“Looking around, I kept thinking the same thing I did the first time I went to Port-au-Prince with Manman. How can some people live in a small village in the mountains with only lamps for illumination and others live in a city where every street corner has its own giant lamp? It made the world seem unbalanced somehow.”

~Edwidge Danticat, *Behind the Mountains*

“Still, I suspect that my uncle was treated according to a biased immigration policy dating back from the early 1980s when Haitians began arriving in Florida in large numbers by boat. In Florida . . . Haitian asylum seekers are disproportionately detained, then deported . . . Was my uncle going to jail because he was Haitian? This is a question he probably asked himself. This is a question I still ask myself. Was he going to jail because he was black? If he were white, Cuban, anything other than Haitian, would he have been going to Krome?”

~Edwidge Danticat, *Brother, I'm Dying*

In addition to her increasing notoriety as a fiction writer, Danticat has come into her own as a trusted voice on Haitian politics, and she regularly writes columns for mainstream news publications, including *The New York Times*. Her topics include anything from the arts, to Haitian American cultural issues, to the Haitian earthquake, to a topic she continues to take up with increasing fearlessness and force: immigration. For instance, her March 27, 2012 Op-Ed, “Detention is No Holiday” markedly deviates from her earlier days of couched critique as she speaks forthrightly about the disregard for the humane treatment of immigrants in US immigration policy, specifically citing the dismissive and officially titled hearing “Holiday on ICE” (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) as a case in point:

The flippant title of the hearing shows a blatant disregard for the more than 110 people who have died in immigration custody since 2003. One of them was my uncle Joseph, an 81-year-old throat cancer survivor who spoke with an artificial voice box. He arrived in Miami in October 2004 after fleeing an uprising in Haiti. He had a valid passport and visa, but when he requested political asylum, he was arrested and taken to the

Krome detention center in Miami. His medications for high blood pressure and an inflamed prostate were taken away, and when he fell ill during a hearing, a Krome nurse accused him of faking his illness. When he was finally transported, in leg chains, to the prison ward of a nearby hospital, it was already too late. He died the next day. (“Holiday”)

This short passage succinctly recounts a family situation that Danticat dedicates her 2007 memoir, *Brother, I’m Dying* to detailing in a much more nuanced, and historically contextualized, way. This passage also highlights that while Danticat embraces news outlets as an important part of her political and cultural work for reaching the broadest audience possible, there is only so much one can say within the narrow confines of journalistic guidelines. Danticat addresses the expressive limits of such forums in *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work* where she gives a tongue in cheek recount of the media attention she received immediately following the January 12, 2010 earthquake in Haiti: “And even before the first aftershock, people were calling me asking, ‘Edwidge, what are you going to do? When are you going back? Could you come on television or on the radio and tell us how you feel? Could you write us fifteen hundred words or less?’” (18).

Speaking as someone who watched media coverage of the earthquake with a critical eye, it is readily apparent that Danticat did indeed take it upon herself to respond to these media requests, and that she was emotionally distraught while doing so. This was frustrating and painful to watch especially in how her critical insights were dismissed in a fetishistic focus on the presumed “raw material” of her affective response.

Repeatedly, white male journalists were asked for their analysis, while she was repeatedly asked to *feel*: How do you feel? What are your people feeling? The patriarchal, racialized, and imperial divisions established between the questions she was asked versus the questions posed to other (white) journalists was stark. And yet, there was a simple truth that remained: if she did not respond to and accept the role of the “face of Haiti,” Haiti would once again be over-written by the Pat Robertsons of the world. Thus, while an imperfect, and over-determined forum through which to deliver her perspective, it remained a necessary one.

In truth, any form of representation comes with its own over-determinations. This is why, I suggest, Danticat utilizes multiple genres and forums through which to articulate parallel analyses of U.S. immigration policies and the experiences of Haitian Americans in different representational registers. While the use memoir in *Brother, I'm Dying* allows her to make more straightforward structural critiques than her fiction work allows her, alternately, her young adult first person fiction *Behind the Mountains* allows her to deliver couched critique through the perceptual register of the diary of an adolescent girl. Through a series of close readings I highlight how both strategies are powerful in their own right while performing their analyses on different, yet equally important, registers.

*Behind the Mountains* is a young adult first person fiction account of a young rural Haitian girl, Celiane. The narrative account is written in epistolary form, and we are told that Celiane's teacher gave her a journal in which to record her thoughts. The narrative takes place between October 2000 and March 2001, which although a relatively

short period of time, is met with drastic changes in Celiane's world. On a personal level, Celiane finds herself moving from the rural area of Beau Jour to the nation's capital of Port-au-Prince, from which to then immigrate with her mother and brother to New York, where her father has been living. As Danticat recounts in the postscript, "I wrote this book to explore what it might be like to move to the United States from Haiti in more recent times . . . I wanted to show . . . how many young people who move to the United States these days go through two kinds of migration: one from the rural areas to the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, then from Port-au-Prince to a major American city" (164). The personal details of Celiane's journey are held in close tension with the turbulence of Haiti's political backdrop, which at this snapshot in time was marked by Aristide's second presidential election.

*Brother, I'm Dying*, is a memoir that won the National Book Critics Award, and which documents the interdependent webs of relation at a certain period of time between Danticat, her father, and her father's brother, the uncle who raised her for the first several years of her life. As her "Holiday on ICE" article recaps, the narrative is in part focused on her uncle's untimely death due to the inhumane treatment of U.S. customs and immigration officers who withheld the medication he took for his throat condition. This scenario is also interwoven with her own father's illness and death, and the near synonymous birth of her daughter: "I found out I was pregnant the same day that my father's rapid weight loss and chronic shortness of breath were positively diagnosed as end-stage pulmonary fibrosis" (3). If this circle of life and death sounds surreal, such surrealness is offset by Danticat's strikingly realist tone. Indeed, the "fake-lore" that has

come to define her writing is markedly absent within this work, and self-consciously replaced with a plethora of historical facts, contexts, and details documenting U.S. imperial connections to Haiti, and in which her penetrating, and mature, social critique is articulated.

If *Brother, I'm Dying* parallels *Behind the Mountains* and Danticat's corpus more generally, in its ability to hold in close tension the microcosm of personal relations with the macrocosm of national and global politics, its critique is articulated in a more structural, rather than perceptual analysis of social relations. This realist framework also grants Danticat the opportunity to more directly evoke a testimonio ethos than her other narrative frameworks afford her:

I write these things now, some as I witnessed them and today remember them, others from official documents, as well as the borrowed recollections of family members. But the gist of them was told to me over the years, in part by my uncle Joseph, in part by my father. Some were told offhand, quickly. Others, in greater detail. What I learned from my father and uncle, I learned out of sequence and in fragments. This is an attempt at cohesiveness, and at re-creating a few wondrous and terrible months when their lives and mine intersected in startling ways, forcing me to look forward and back at the same time. I am writing only because they can't. (25)

Here Danticat's words strongly resonate with Carolyn Steedman's notion of memory work, in which pieces of one's past and present are reworked for impersonal effect; to

transform them into social knowledge. By rendering her piecemeal memory work apparent, Danticat's narrative maintains an allegiance to the deliberative strand of testimonio, in which she exposes the seams of her knowledge to safeguard against readers holding her to strict and narrow definitions of objective truth. She instead utilizes these "fragments" to arrive at more complete understanding of her father's and uncle's individual histories and their relation to structures of power, particularly as connected to U.S.-Haitian relations and immigration policies. By focusing on the interconnecting, or as she suggests "intersecting," histories of her father, uncle, and herself, Danticat also performs a polyvocal testimonial ethos.

Thus, while both *Behind the Mountains* and *Brother, I'm Dying* are laden with historical references and contextualization, the ways in which they deliver such information varies. Early on in *Brother, I'm Dying*, Danticat gives more straightforward context than her work usually provides: "The hill in Bel Air on which the house was built had been the site of a famous battle between mulatto abolitionists and French colonists who'd controlled most of the island since 1697 and had imported black Africans to labor on coffee and sugar plantations as slaves. A century later, slaves and mulattoes joined together to drive the French out, and on January 1, 1804 formed the Republic of Haiti" (29). Whereas works such as *Krik? Krak!* imbue the reader with the interpretive power to forge cognitive connections between the narratives and the significant historical events with which they coincide, here Danticat forthrightly delivers fundamental historical information on the formation of Haiti as a nation state. Aware that much of her audience will be uninformed of the geopolitics of Haiti, Danticat claims the right to both

entertain and inform through the narrative world she constructs.

If such is the appropriate mode of address through which to inform many of the adult readers who have no doubt come to her work via *The New York Times*, or other mainstream avenues through which she has gained notoriety, this approach might prove too hard hitting and direct for a younger audience. This does not mean that Danticat needs to steer clear of history lessons within *Behind the Mountains*, but rather that her delivery must alter. The epistolary form written in the voice of a young girl allows her a narrative device through which to call attention important cultural and historical dates via entry dates, use simple language, and to make sociopolitical critiques from an understated, and less hardened, perspective. For instance, within the first few pages readers are met with their first cultural lesson: “I learned from my geography lesson that the name of this country, Haiti, comes from the Arawak Indian word Ayiti, which means mountainous land or land on high. There is also a proverb that says, ‘Behind the mountains are more mountains.’ This is certainly true because our house is on a mountain, but not the tallest one. Some mountains are bigger and taller still” (4-5). Within this short passage, young readers are provided with a lesson in pre-colonial history (the continuing presence of the Arawak people), cultural forms of communication (the proverb “behind the mountains”), and a topographical lesson (the mountainous terrain of Haiti) all at once.

*Behind the Mountains* also explores other themes of immigration in a less structural register, to better connect with a young readership on issues they might better relate to or think about. For instance, in the second half of the collection Danticat

devotes much attention to Celiane's nervousness of starting a new school, complete with her feelings of shyness about meeting new friends, and even getting lost on her bus ride home: "I understand now what Manman meant when she talked about being lost in the city. I felt as though I was looking both for my new home as well as for myself. After all, who was I, here without my family, without the father who had sent for me and the mother and brother I had come with?" (108).

Thus, while Danticat utilizes the trope of adolescent peer pressure and draws upon the confusion we all feel when inhabiting a new social space to create empathetic bridges between readers and Celiane, she also moves beyond the general to address the particularities of Celiane's situation, and how her own situation might differ from that of her readership's. Language, of course, is one of the main ways in which Danticat accomplishes this: "Papa said that I would be in a special class for students just like me, who had recently come from Haiti and did not yet speak English. The lessons would be in Creole" (100). Through this maneuver Danticat at once addresses a central pragmatic issue of immigration—the acquiring of a new language—while also touching on the theme of social difference. Imagine, she seems to ask her readers, if beyond the "typical" teenage things you worry about, you were also learning a new language and moving from a country that few people had heard of? By contextualizing and dramatizing the more generic theme of "not belonging," Danticat at once connects with dominantly positioned young audiences while challenging them to think beyond themselves. Simultaneously, this maneuver also works to help other socially marginalized, although differently situated, readers find a narrative that helps them to better articulate their own sense of

cultural non-belonging.

In staying true to her claim of occupying Haiti's "tenth department," Danticat also utilizes this narrative to deliver a comparative perspective on the overlaps and departures in Haiti and the U.S. For instance, Danticat utilizes the stressful homelife of Celiane's New York friend, Immacula, to comment on the U.S. racialized, gendered, and classed, service economy: "Immacula is back . . . I overheard her and Faiherbe talking about Immacula's mother, who, it seems, spends a lot of time working as a home attendant for other people and very little time at her own home, which leaves only Immacula to take care of her younger sisters" (119). Through this informal observation—qualified with "overheard" and "it seems"—Danticat positions Celiane to deliver a couched critique of how structural inequities play out in the crevices of people's daily lives, creating cyclical and intergenerational inequalities, and unfairly impacting the lives of children, not just the lives of adult workers. And just a few pages later, Celiane turns attention to a letter she has received from her cousin Thérèse:

Thérèse's mother, like many poor mothers in the provinces, has decided to send her to live with a family of a man her mother sometimes sells vetiver to in the market in Léogâne . . . This doesn't sound good. Most girls who end up in this kind of arrangement never go to school . . . Tante Rose was very lucky. Perhaps Thérèse will be, too. But for every story like Tante Rose's, there are thousands of girls who end up alone in the city with nothing. (123)

Through this passage we not only hear Celiane's sad and reluctant realization of how her

cousin's educational opportunities are being taken from her, we also hear a comparative analysis of how while the particularities of Immacula's and Thérèse's stories differ in terms of their national and regional locations, both of their life possibilities are being prematurely stunted while they are still children due to the structural effects of sexist, classist social policies. The qualification "for every story like Tante Rose's, there are thousands of girls who end up alien in the city with nothing" performs a couched critique of the myths of upward mobility and meritocracy. Between these affectively articulated lines, Danticat pushes her young readership to understand that while Thérèse and Immacula might in fact prove to be the exceptions to the rule, statistically speaking, this is unlikely.

Danticat also utilizes the narrative to address the challenges that cross-continental families face, from the pragmatics of letter writing and the shipping of pre-recorded audio messages, to the hassles of visa approval, to the growing pains they face when reunited. Specifically, Celiane's older brother, Moy, and her father develop a tumultuous relationship once they are reunited, and after several arguments, her father asks Moy to leave his house, and Moy all too gladly moves out. Within this dynamic, Celiane finds herself torn, with strong attachments to both her father and her brother. It is finally in a letter that the wise-beyond-her-years Celiane helps her family to bridge this rift: "I know we cannot return to the past and be the way we were in Beau Jour, but whatever family meant there and whatever it means now, I know we can be that, too" (150). *Behind the Mountains* also addresses the lighter side of the contradictions of diasporic consciousness, as when Celiane informs us, "We heard on the Haitian radio station that

there would be a big snowstorm tomorrow” (98). Considering that snow is a foreign concept in Haiti, meteorologically speaking, this tongue in cheek inclusion serves to remind the reader of the between-worlds space Celiane and her family, like other immigrant families, inhabit on multiple levels, some of them more lighthearted than others.

This theme of snow, as a symbol of the different worlds that Haitian nationals and their diasporic counterparts inhabit is also taken up in *Brother, I'm Dying*:

‘What does snow feel like?’ Tane Denise’s oldest brother, George, asked. My father didn’t talk about how cold and damp snow could be or how slippery and dangerous it could become when gelled and frozen. He didn’t talk about the beauty of the individual flakes or how a few feet of them could look like a pasty rug over a lumpy bed. The only thing we have to compare it to, he simply said, was hail. (92)

While Danticat considers all of the different ways that her father could have chosen to describe snow, she is instead struck by the simplicity of his analysis and how inadequate it seems. This descriptive and conceptual rift is a telling reminder for readers housed outside of Haitian and Haitian American politics of how incomplete our own understanding of Danticat’s narrative may be. Indeed, it is probably for this reason then, that she grounds *Brother, I'm Dying* in a realist framework. While more simple in its form of address, it performs a structural social commentary that her more affectively laden works cannot.

It is actually one of the main ironies of *Brother, I'm Dying* that it is through

Danticat's self-conscious steering away from her trademark orally-laden poetic language that leaves a pronounced emotional impact on the reader. In fact, while the first section of the book is marked by lush, descriptive prose, when describing the horror of her uncle Joseph's run in with U.S. Customs and Immigration, and his subsequent death, Danticat uncharacteristically reduces her narrative to facts and figures. The most literal reason for this is that while earlier stories housed within the narrative are spun from oral tale-telling and the recollections of her own memory that are interwoven with interpretations and analyses in order to provide coherence to the events they narrate, for this last part of the narrative she finds herself completely reliant on official U.S. documents to piece together what happened. But while this may be the logistical reason for her sparse prose and a reliance on fact-based details in the concluding chapters, as a master storyteller Danticat no doubt utilizes the reality of insufficient information to good aesthetic effect:

My uncle was now alien 27041999. He and Maxo [his son] had left Port-au-Prince's Toussaint Louverture Airport on American Airlines flight 822. The flight was scheduled to leave at 12:32 p.m., but was a bit delayed and left later than that . . . Once they got off the plane at around two thirty p.m., my uncle and Maxo waited their turn with a large group of visitors in one of the long Customs and Border Protection lines. When they reached the CBP checkpoint, they presented their passports and valid tourist visas to a CPB officer. When asked how long they would be staying in the United States, my uncle, not understanding the full implication of that choice, said he wanted to apply for temporary asylum. He and Maxo were

then taken aside and placed in a customs waiting area. (214)

Within this paragraph, the only clause in which Danticat performs the role of interpreter, rather than mere relay of information, is when she qualifies why her uncle applied for temporary asylum, which she suggests was his “not understanding the full implication of that choice.” The full implication, it turns out, is that this choice to be truthful would lead to his death. As Danticat reflects, “I can only assume that when he was asked how long he would be staying in the United States, he knew that he would be staying past the thirty days his visa allowed him and he wanted to tell the truth” (215). But these interpretive clauses aside, the facts and figures of the seemingly mundane events that led to her uncle’s death serve a larger purpose: to highlight the senselessness of the events, and how despite her professional role as interpreter, memory worker, and storyteller who relies on oral accounts just as often as she draws upon official documents, she cannot *understand* how this happened.

Danticat’s fact, temporal, and figure-obsessed prose (which does re-transition to her more affectively laden language in the final chapter, aptly-titled “Transition”) performs a similar critique as Strejilevich’s claim that while official state documents might get at objective knowledge of the facts, they are inadequate for reaching social understanding of such knowledge; that the only worthwhile historical meaning lies in interpretation, not in the skeletal breakdown of events. Danticat strengthens this point by juxtaposing her fixation with the facts (the reader is given the sense that she has poured over these details, reading and rereading them to find some sort of meaning hidden amidst their concreteness) by alternately posing several questions and speculations that

she is left with:

I don't know why my uncle had not simply used the valid visa he had to enter the United States, just as he had at least thirty times before, and later apply for asylum. I'm sure now that he had no intention of staying in either New York or Miami for the rest of his life . . . Had he acted based on someone's advice? On something he'd heard on the radio, read in the newspapers? Did he think that given all that had happened to him, the authorities—again those with the power both to lend a hand and to cut one off—would have to believe him? (215)

Surely, Danticat's frantic attempt to make meaning where she cannot find any resonates with anyone who has lost anyone to seemingly senseless circumstances, violent or otherwise. Her rhetorical phrasings also mimic her continued cognitive attempts to piece the situation together: "Documents . . . indicate," "According to the transcript," "Again no further explanation or details were requested" (216-218).

But beyond her inability to understand how her uncle seeking temporary asylum transpired into his death is her inability to understand what she finds within the documents she gains access to. For instance, she learns that while he was in New York for his throat surgery in 1984, a file was opened and closed, granting her uncle the "alien" file number 27041999 (220). She learns that he was fed only chips and soda regardless of the length of time he was detained (221). She reads the "Discretionary Authority Checklist for Alien Applicants," and how under the question "Would the applicant be admissible if s/he had a valid passport and/or visa?" Officer Reyes, the officer in charge

of his case, checked, “Yes.”, a response Danticat responds to with the narrative interruption, “(My uncle had both)” (224).

The most disturbing information she learns, however, is how her uncle’s medication—which would have saved his life—was taken from him, accompanied by a patronizing medical note: ““Patient uses a traditional Haitian medicine for prostrate & says if he doesn’t take it he pees blood & has pain”” (226). As Danticat bluntly adds, “Russ Knocke, a spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, would later derogatorily refer to my uncle’s traditional medicine as ‘a voodoo-like potion’” (227). Without even attending to the forcefulness of her critique articulated in re-quoting the absurdity of what was factually stated, Danticat’s choice to name names, to identify for her readers the specific officials and doctors who held her uncle’s life in their hands, and who failed their human contract to him in the service of a national project, marks the anger, outrage, and disbelief that has led Danticat to transition from “fake-lore” to the nightmare of her realist account; an account that if it were not documented in official records would sound surreal, indeed.

The straightforwardness of Danticat’s critique in the narrative’s final pages carries so much weight precisely because this direct commentary is not a register that Danticat typically utilizes in her creative work, and it is a much more contextualized commentary than she is able to provide in her 1,500 word maximum media articles. Taken together, the perceptual and structural critiques of U.S. immigration and the diasporic experiences of Haitian Americans articulated within *Behind the Mountains* and *Brother, I’m Dying* reinforce how Danticat’s multilayered approach is not limited to language or epistemes,

but is also enabled through her ability to reach across audiences through a self-conscious employment of multiple narrative frameworks that mean on different registers.

*Conclusion: Negotiating Readerships and the Virtues of Not Understanding*

"There is something quite profound about not knowing, claiming not to know, or not gaining access to knowledge that enables us to know that we are not the sole (re)producers of our lives. But we would have to apprehend the loss that comes from not knowing and feel its absences in an immediate and palpable way in order to remake ourselves enough, so that our analyses might change. We have to learn how to intuit the consequences of not knowing, to experience their effects in order to reverse some of the deeply embedded deposits on which an imperial psyche rests."

~M. Jacqui Alexander, "Whose New World Order? Teaching for Justice"

It has not been the intent of this chapter to downplay the very real political risks that Danticat takes in marketing her fiction to a mainstream US audience, or of utilizing English as the linguistic vehicle to reach such an audience. As Stuart Hall has laid out for us in his theoretical mapping of the complex practices of encoding and decoding cultural texts, there is certainly more than one way a text can mean and readings of the same text can without doubt span a progressive-reactionary spectrum.<sup>1</sup> As Hall explores, the author's encoding of a particular cultural text only comprises a partial (though significant) aspect of how a text signifies; the situated and power-laden relationship between text and audience is a critical component in how a text will be read and understood. This is especially true in a cultural landscape in which hegemonic Anglo-American, middle-class scripts continue to comprise the unmarked, normative backdrop against which the accounts of all (homogenized) "others" are read and understood.

In relation to my reading Danticat's work as a dominantly positioned U.S. social actor, I often think specifically about, in the words of bell hooks, "the moment of not understanding as a space to learn" (299). My reason for this has everything to do with my own first experience with Danticat. Assigned *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in my

Introduction to Women's Studies course at a small Irish-Catholic liberal arts college, a strikingly homogenous body of white, middle-class, New England students was broken into small groups to discuss Danticat's book without an understanding of the sociohistorical complexities of Haiti or U.S.-Haitian relations. The professor did not provide a social or historical framing of the work or the author, and the book was only slotted for one day on the syllabus. In my own group discussion centered on the "testing" done by the narrator's mother to see if she was still a virgin, a discussion that served the purpose of having the group decide "we" were lucky not to be "them." In the days leading up to this class period I had become affectively invested in Danticat's book, and I felt confused about the lack of structured discussion around the book's many themes.

A few years later, I again encountered Danticat's work in a classroom setting while completing my master's, and the framing of Danticat and her work could not have been more different. This time we were assigned her (then) new collection *The Dew Breaker*, which explores the psychological and material affects of the Duvalier regime on generations of Haitian and Haitian Americans. In our first discussion of the book (our graduate professor assigned two full weeks to the text) the professor came armed with numerous maps to familiarize us with Caribbean, and specifically Haitian, geography. She delivered a mini-historical lecture on Haitian history and U.S.-Haitian relations, choking up halfway through from the political passion that drove her message. She framed discussion in this way to inform a largely uninformed student body and to do justice to Danticat's work. She did not claim to know everything about Danticat or Haiti, and yet her commitment to modeling an active engagement—and her desire to pass that

commitment on to us—was clear. It was in this context that I began to more fully make sense of the discomfort I experienced upon first encountering Danticat in such a radically decontextualized manner. If it felt “wrong” or confusing at the time, this juxtaposition of learning experiences proved productive in thinking through what it means to encounter art and literature through a grounded, sociohistorical, social justice lens that works to challenge national discourses of melting-pot multiculturalism.

In addition to these classroom encounters, I have also wrestled with Danticat’s work in my individual reading practices. When first reading *Breath, Eyes, Memory* as an undergraduate I was pulled in by the story, yet I found Danticat’s language usage to be sparse and unsatisfying. I also found this true on first reading *The Dew Breaker*. As someone who understands that *how* a story is constructed is intimately connected to the meaning that is derived from it, I could not understand how I was so pulled in—but not quite. Neither well-versed in Haitian history nor a speaker of French or Creole, I was not able to hear the historical resonances or Danticat’s patterns in phrasing that allows the French or Creole speaker to hear echoes of Haitian sayings and sentiments embedded within the English. It certainly did not occur to me that you could make language do such things. “Listening” to Danticat’s writing voice has taken time, and patience, and the ability to move from the knee-jerk sentiment “I don’t like” to the more honest, “I don’t fully understand.”

It has been through the process of not understanding—of wanting to understand—that I have continued to read Danticat’s works, and to seek out articles and interviews with her speaking about her work. It is through this slow, uncertain process that the

Danticat as “storyteller” has emerged from my once rigid definition of her as “writer,” and that I have been able to recognize that the “lack” I initially read into her work had everything to do with my own inability to see and understand her project, not the work itself. Reading Danticat’s corpus has been for me a pedagogical encounter in active listening and of learning to un-know those worldviews that have sedimented themselves into my understandings of language, cross-cultural relations, and writing.

hooks’s seemingly obvious phrase “the moment of now understanding as a space to learn” (if we already knew everything, what would there be to learn?) seems particularly relevant to connecting my personal experiences with Danticat’s work to thinking through a reading praxis that facilitates an active engagement on the part of the reading audience while maintaining a respectful distance from that which our social positionings have not enabled us to know. This distancing, as we have already explored, is masterfully utilized in Danticat’s work, in which the spaces between what is told become placeholders that invite some readers a moment of shared intimacy while simultaneously safeguarding a space that makes visible the power asymmetries at play for a non-Haitian audience reading her work.<sup>79</sup> In other words, aware of the ways her work may come to be thought of as representative of an authentic (read: monolithic, unchanging) Haitian culture, Danticat at once opens a space for dialogue and cross-

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<sup>79</sup> This notion of spacing as placeholder brings to mind Brent Hayes Edwards’ notion of the “prop” that allows for cross-cultural exchange while making discursively visible the asymmetries and incompatibilities that accompany such dialogue. See Edwards, Brent Hayes. “Variations on a Preface.” *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003: 16-38.

cultural understanding while refusing to play the role of native informant.<sup>80</sup> In Danticat's words: "I hope to inspire the readers to learn more about their connection to the material they're reading. I hope to spark their interest and send them on that quest for more information" (Capshaw Smith 103). In addition to safeguarding a space from which to speak and not be consumed,<sup>81</sup> Danticat's purposeful fissures seek to pique the interest of the uninformed reader to a point of active engagement, thus shifting the power dynamic between author and audience (read as unidirectional entertainment) to one of storyteller and listener, a far more embodied and interdependent relationship that potentially enables a willful and ethical engagement premised on mutuality and recognition as illustrated in Danticat's powerful epilogue to *Krik? Krak!*.

In making the transition from Danticat's text to critical reflections on ways to engage her work as an active reader, this notion of author/reader being reworked into one of storyteller/listener seems especially productive. Russell West-Pavlov's *Transcultural Graffiti: Diasporic Writing and the Teaching of Literary Studies* offers effective ways of de-centering hegemonic assumptions, identities, and epistemes when readers from dominant social groups encounter work by (post)colonial writers. Central to West-Pavlov's discussion is the importance of de-centering the interpretive role of the reader in relation to these texts, particularly through the concept of "secondary un-knowers," a suggested positioning for specifically Anglo readers when engaging the works of non-

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<sup>80</sup> Danticat elsewhere has spoken on the importance of representations in overcoming stereotypes (Capshaw Smith 103) as well as the dangers of writers from "smaller groups" being thought to portray an "authentic" account of their culture from which foreign readers can absorb their "insight" (Lyons 190).

<sup>81</sup> Denise Shaw also importantly suggests that the "veil of silence" that imbeds itself within Danticat's fiction is in part due to the traumatic histories her work addresses, which in turn positions the (willful?) "not telling" as important to her stories as what is told (3).

Anglo writers (170). One of his suggested strategies for embodying such a positioning is through the act of *listening*: “the ‘risk’ entailed by the white listener is the very real one of admitting irremediable ignorance with regard to the other culture” (169).

While admitting to what one does not know or understand, West-Pavlov suggests that the readers as secondary un-knowers agree to relinquish their comfortable positions as privileged subjects, and instead agree to willingly engage with that which they do not know by *listening* to the knowledge, perspectives, and reflections presented in the works of socially marginalized authors. While aspects of West-Pavlov’s argument perhaps come dangerously close to re-positioning the writer as native informant of a culture that remains profoundly other than the one inhabited by the reader, it is important to note that for West-Pavlov such listening becomes “an active mode of openness” (156) that does not prevent readers from in turn critically engaging with the work, but rather introduces a “moment of hesitation in the process of discursive production” (160). This “hesitation” or “delay” thus serves as “an interruption of the economy of the same” (160), and in so doing creates a *space* within the interpretive processes of dominantly positioned reading audiences for marginalized modes of knowledge production to pervade their consciousness without being pre-positioned as already “other.”<sup>82</sup>

In my own understanding of West-Pavlov, the usefulness of readers positioning themselves as “secondary un-knowers” is not as a self-reflexive end in itself but rather

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<sup>82</sup> Kirstin Squint’s “Exploring the Borderland between Realism and Magical Realism in *Krik? Krak!*” becomes a pressing example of the urgent need to seriously consider the potentialities and ethical importance of West-Pavlov’s notion of “secondary un-knowers.” Squint’s discussion painfully (mis)reads Danticat’s text from a profoundly Western perspective in which the elements of Haitian folklore and Vodou present within the text become reconfigured as “sprinklings” of magical realism into a predominantly realist text (121). The epistemological violence the text incurs as a result of Squint’s reading is precisely what could be challenged through moments of “hesitation” and active listening that presume a notion of self-reflexivity, and thus, de-center presumptions made from a decidedly Western literary perspective.

marks an important beginning—an opening that allows for a more fully human encounter with the texts we hope to engage. In any cross-cultural exchange (and in intracultural exchanges as well as Danticat illustrates) there are bound to be moments of “silence,” gaps in knowledge, clashing beliefs, references and concepts failing to translate. By writing across linguistic systems, epistemes, and narrative registers Danticat performs a writing praxis that asks us not to gloss over these inevitable moments but to rather understand them as an opportunity for dialogue, as a space to learn.

This, I think, is at a profound level what Danticat means through her powerful statement, “Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I’ve always thought it meant to be a writer . . . . Creating fearlessly for people who see/watch/listen/read fearlessly” (10; 148). Danticat’s own fearlessness in brashly traversing different linguistic, cultural, and material worlds—all of which come with their own racialized, geopolitical, and class-based risks—and bringing these worlds to mainstream U.S. reading audiences through her writing praxis, serves as a challenge to spark the reader’s own interpretive fearlessness. Her work is consciously situated at the nexus of memory work and dream work by bringing history to bear on contemporary Haitian and U.S. landscapes, while challenging us to open ourselves to the possibility of new social scripts that are not dependent on hierarchical social orders. It is not a naïve hope that guides this practice. Rather, by rooting her narratives in an array of racialized class locations and geographies attentive to the social categories that situationally serve to bridge and divide, Danticat demands that readers be attentive to their own social

locations, without ever fixing what these social locations mean, or foreclosing the possibility of us forging new social scripts through our interpersonal relationships.

**Postscript: Forging Cross-Border Readerships: One Reader's Perspective**

“What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity.”

~Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*

“Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly.”

~Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

I have written a lot about “readers,” in an abstract, general sense throughout this dissertation. But now I would like to turn to my own self, as reader and interpreter, and as someone looking to learn from feminist testimonios, in order to suggest some of the ways in which reading these works has affected my own interpretive practices and beingness in the world. As I've suggested, as I understand it, a vital component of feminist testimonio is not only to inform readers about material conditions happening in other parts of the world, or to cultivate structures of empathy that result in quantifiable forms of social action, but to also allow the insights and knowledge gleaned from the practitioners' processes of memory work to carry on in the daily lives and interpretive practices of its readerships.

This project very much began as a way for me to understand how polyvocal feminist testimonios hold dominantly positioned readers like myself accountable to the knowledge they put forth within their covers. Though I initially came to these works to gain knowledge of the material circumstances in which these women narrators find themselves, I quickly became interested in their rhetorical practices and their attentiveness to cultural representation as a central site of social struggle. The aptly titled

*Playing With Fire* testifies to this. But the more time I have spent with these texts, the more complex my relationship with them has become. As a geopolitically and racially privileged subject whose position within the academy also grants me with “expert” status, I continually struggle to negotiate a just response to these works, one which refuses an oversimplified identification with (fusion) or distancing from (forwarding) the knowledge they put forth.

Consequently, throughout the drafting process I struggled with where and how to insert myself into discussions on these marginal experience narratives, aware of how “interrupting” the political and imaginative work of these texts to focus on my relationship to them threatens to replicate and consolidate well-worn structures of power and privilege. And yet, to not consider my subject position in relation to them, or how their interpretive practices have affected my own, also seems politically suspect. It would be a missed opportunity not to include a more personal reflection on how such works actively construct cross-border readerships and interpretive communities in line with a post-positivist realist model of experience and identity. For while my social location positions me in different material and cultural worlds than those depicted in these women’s narrative accounts, so too do I affiliate myself with, and seek to learn from, the processes of memory work, rhetorical life writing practices, and hybrid political ideologies these works perform. How then, to respond, and to position myself alongside of the truth claims these works put forth without recentering my privilege?

It is not possible to assess whether and when any attempt to engage such questions is truly “successful.” What I do know is that I must work from my own social

location in order to illustrate how the lessons learned from feminist testimonios have resounded and manifested in my daily life and interpretive practices, and how they have served to further influence my understandings of social power and privilege. Among many other locational sites, I speak as a white, culturally Irish-Catholic, bisexual, middle-class feminist and mother born and raised in rural upstate New York who now finds herself a Feminist Studies doctoral candidate in the Department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. My memory work strives to speak from and to these varied locations—and their accompanying ideologies—to discuss how my locations within these sites have rendered certain social discourses of my life dominant while rendering others mute, and to reiterate the centrality of self-reflexive life writing practices to progressive political platforms.

The following sections set out to dialogically interface with the lessons I have learned from feminist polyvocal testimonios in a way that extends the politics of vulnerability they so bravely assert and to illustrate how they inform how I interpret my own life story. For if practitioners of testimonio have opened up their own lives to critique and analysis so that dominantly situated readers such as myself can come to learn the limits of our social knowledge and interpretive frameworks, it seems a just response to open up my own life to critique and analysis as a way of enacting and extending the model of dialogic reciprocity the practitioners of feminist testimonio perform within their texts.

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At a fundamental level, polyvocal feminist testimonios remind us of the struggle for “truth” in/as knowledge production, how all knowledge claims come from a situated somewhere, and how our processes of memory work are simultaneously influenced by our past and present. And so, it is not without irony, and profound resonance, that while writing my dissertation on life writing practices and memory work, I have found myself returning to a site ridden with my own childhood memories: Glen Falls, New York, a small, conservative, upstate New York “city.” It is located within the Adirondack Park, or the “North Country,” as locals call it. I have sublet an office space here for \$100 a month, two blocks from where I attended Catholic school for eight years, a school that due to lack of satisfying educational options, my son is also attending during our temporary stay. Glens Falls is 96.5% white, slightly whiter and much more affluent than the nearby working-class town of Hudson Falls, NY where I grew up living and where I have resided this past year.

My “return” is marked by a ten-year absence from this site of memory, during which time I attended undergraduate and graduate school in Burlington, Vermont and Minneapolis, Minnesota. In some ways, much has changed since I left this space, in others, very little. The same faces greet me at the local library—older, yet familiar. My kindergarten teacher, already at an elevated age when she taught me twenty-five years ago, is still teaching. And yet downtown Glens Falls, falling in line with other small towns and cities in the midst of the “buy local” renaissance, is much more vibrant than when I grew up here. Two years ago even, there were no coffee shops. Now there are four within walking distance of my office. There is now a theatre house across the street,

a Thai restaurant adjacent to my office building, a specialty wine shop nearby. These stops have become staples for me as I have taken up temporary residence within these quarters. Uninterrogated, they are a comforting buffer between the comforts of metro living I have grown accustomed to and the unassuming air of rural life that I have always loved. More critically, they have enabled me to reflect on the concept of worlds within worlds. I grew up here wanting to leave, and could not understand why anyone would elect to live out their days in such a prosaic place. Now, coming back, I am constantly amazed at my own contentment at writing my dissertation in this very same social space.

In returning to this space, I am also constantly reminded of how the “places” my research has taken me is deeply connected to the experiences I had, and did not have, growing up in this environment. Writing about globalization and transnational feminist thought feels out of place here, to say the least, and yet looking back I am able to recognize that it was precisely the homogeneity of my childhood social landscape that instilled in me a desire to put my world into a larger perspective; to wonder what life might be like, if at a young age, in precisely the same social landscape, I had been taught how my daily living conditions were entangled with and dependent upon the lives of others in very different, and far less privileged, social circumstances.

To suggest that I now occupy a different “place” in this landscape of my childhood is also not to say that this is easily achieved, or that I am not complacent in maintaining dominant structures of power and privilege. I am reminded daily of the contradictions of small town life and how our affective attachments to certain social norms are established early on. For instance, when living in Burlington, Vermont and the

Twin Cities, Minnesota I found myself struck by the whiteness of the population, especially outside of city limits. However, upon returning to Glens Falls, it has been unsettling to me how the homogenous demographics feel “normal,” as just the “way it is.” In other words, I have found myself needing to remain vigilant in order to avoid falling into previously established modes of perception, and in continuing to read this social space with a critical eye.

My “return” has also met with significant changes in my personal life. My heterosexual relationship of ten years, which began here, has now ended here as well. My relationship with my former partner who traveled with me from this site, to Vermont, to the Twin Cities, and back, has altered, leaving us now as co-parents to our son, Quinn. This change has not coincidentally coincided with the reclamation of my bisexuality that I let go of during the purview of this relationship. Because I am still in the midst of these changes, I am unable to create a neat and tidy “this is what they mean” narrative. What I do know is that in thinking extendedly about the act of memory work this year in this social space, I have become increasingly cognizant of how my life choices continue to be informed by the structures of affect I internalized while growing up here. While I joke that I left the “Gayest City in the US” (as Minneapolis was voted in 2011) to divorce and “come out” in conservative New York rurality, it is precisely being back in this “traditional,” and what might be easily interpreted as socially restrained, space that has paradoxically allowed me the mental freedom to explore and confront certain feelings and life choices that I have self-censored within my graduate department’s paradigm of

“progressive politics” due to their location outside of politically “acceptable” narrative discourses.

In recognizing this, I have come to the uncomfortable, if not productively critical, truth that it has been this “progressive atmosphere”—and not a conservative, rural homophobia—that in many ways has kept me from implementing these life changes sooner. Rather, I have struggled to reach this point because of progressive political assumptions of what a liberated queer life should and should not look like. Indeed, my story has little room in progressive circles because it is not a progressive tale. It is a story about imperfect choices, and how the very choices I made in order to avoid social conformity in the short term served to entrap me more—for at the time I could not see the forest for the trees. It is about my own ensnarement and investment in rural, lower middle class scripts of respectability. It is a story about how the structures of affect we internalize in our childhood remain, even when we travel, and actively distance ourselves, from them.

I moved in with my now-former cisgendered male partner at the age of twenty. At the time of my decision, I saw it as an act of resistance. I did so as a way of moving off of the Catholic campus I found myself located within, as a way of claiming adulthood, and as a means of asserting much yearned for independence from my family. No one in my conservative, Irish Catholic family dared live together before marriage, and at the time, it felt like an exciting transgression. I scheduled an interview with the Catholic powers-that-be to receive permission to live with my boyfriend off campus, out of wedlock. I self-elected to call my grandparents to explain the situation before

someone else in my family could less carefully spread the news. I was feeling the definition of subversive.

That is, until I actually moved in with him, at which point I cried for three consecutive days. I was, belatedly, coming to the realization that in moving outside of one form of social restraint, I had voluntarily elected to constrain myself in another, with my parents interpreting our co-habitation as a sign that we would be married in the future. Ironically, our downtown apartment was located right next to a Catholic church, which took up the majority of our view from the kitchen window. While grappling with my discomfort over the life path I had voluntarily elected to lock myself within, I decided to interpret the church as a “sign” to help me regain my ideological footing. Twice I suited up to go to Sunday mass, hoping that this would alleviate my guilt and provide me with some sort of spiritual direction. Twice I walked up to the door, and just as I went to grab the handle, realized that this was not something I wanted to do at all. Rather, I realized, I was performing what I was affectively conditioned to do: to counter my sin with penance.

While all of this was going on I was also taking my first Women’s Studies courses. Within a couple months of my partner and I moving in together, one of my girlfriends, whose boyfriend was about as meek and mild as my own, began the process of coming out. She brashly cut her long flowing hair, a physical transformation that resulted in a sudden awakening of her personality. Her shyness was replaced with brazenness, her timidity with a cutting laughter. I remember the day she told me her news on the stairwell between classes. I also remember standing there a bit longer, after

she left, wondering how much her situation paralleled mine, her life choice putting yet another question mark on my own.

While I did come to claim my bisexuality, initially confiding in my partner and a handful of close friends, I also felt that our relationship was something deep and multi-faceted, and that while it might be located within narratives of social conformity, it also exceeded them. I did not feel willing to let go of a mature relationship for some thrills of self-revelation. Looking back, this is something I have perpetually struggled with—was my relationship with him ever as mature as I perceived it to be, or was it that I had been programmed to view hetero relationships, especially of the domestic variety, as infinitely more “real”? Meanwhile, I was going to a therapist in order to discuss my lack of desire and how I felt disconnected from people who could understand me. Meanwhile, we were having discussions on whether it was time to call it quits. We joked that we were at the point in our relationship where people decided to end it or get married and have a baby.

Which, as it turns out, is exactly what we did. It was around the same time that my father was diagnosed with prostate cancer. The diagnosis was that it was advanced, and they gave him eighteen-months to live, which in hindsight was disturbingly accurate. One day when my partner and I were in the back of my parents’ van, and when we knew he wasn’t getting any better, I turned to him and said, “We should probably talk about getting married.” That’s the way it happened. No proposal, no head over heels in love, just a pragmatic, gut level response, that coincided with my socially constructed notions of what to do to make fathers happy.<sup>83</sup> I was married three weeks later.

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<sup>83</sup> Of course this was not all of it. My own parents’ relationship was modeled on a mutual friendship more so than romantic love, and a past abusive relationship told me that I was lucky to have someone as sincere

In spite of its resonance with “the good girl syndrome,” I refuse to disown this decision. I made it, and I made it with relish. I thought it a lark: no one thought me the marrying type, so I set out to prove them wrong. Still, the contradictions of this decision abound. My wedding took place while I was enrolled in a feminist literature class on the novels of the Bronte sisters, a body of work notorious for its critiques of the hetero marriage plot. I constructed wedding vows adapted from the writings of British lesbian novelist, Jeanette Winterson. For the ceremony, I borrowed the language and structure of civil unions. And yet the dress, the flowers, the rings, the ceremony, these were all welcomed distractions to the death that was slowly taking over my father’s body. Life in the midst of death, my wedding some sort of memorial to my father in which I constructed myself as the daughter I wished I could be. And here’s that affective component again: I have always loved the ways in which my Irish-Catholic family comes together at weddings. They were always a highlight for me growing up, and that attachment to the feeling of togetherness through matrimonial ritual seemed like something I could give to my family at a time when we were all hurting. Celebration in the midst of loss.

I recite this strand of my life story to reinforce how structures of affect cross-mingle with our socioeconomic and material locations and inform how a single life choice—in this case, to move in with a boy from my home town at a particular time in my life—can transpire into a web a life choices that are tangentially related and yet far

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and gentle as my partner. I remember now thinking, at some level, in the back of my head, that it might not be the best idea to get married before ever having a real relationship with a woman, and yet, because I assured myself that my relationship with my partner was made of the “stuff” that an enduring marriage ought to be made of, I silenced that voice.

from the life path that social actors envision for themselves. On one level, it is a story about love and about how the messiness of interpersonal relationships confounds oversimplified interpretations. It is certainly entangled with a desire to be the dutiful daughter—but it is not only that. It is also rooted in scripts of middle class respectability and rural norms: Where I come from, geographically and ideologically, marrying someone from your hometown is what you do.

While this was not a conscious expectation I had for myself—it seemed to just “happen”—so too have I come to realize how deeply I internalized this social narrative. On some level, it was by always feeling on the outside of this social norm, and intuitively knowing that it did not work for me, that made me want to fit within its frame. And more so than a pressure to succumb to a hetero lifestyle, the “stuckness” that I came to feel within the confines of my marriage was deeply rooted in the social taboo of divorce in my Irish-Catholic family, as well as my own personal fears of failure, of “getting it wrong,” and of being an educated feminist who conformed in troubling ways. Most personally, because the marriage was directly connected to my father’s death I have been long concerned with how my mother would handle the divorce, and whether this would trigger an emotional relapse in her grieving process.

It has only been in returning to this site of my childhood, and being re-confronted with these affective structures in daily life, that I have found the strength to face them and to begin to release their hold on me. Paradoxically, this has also led to a more confusing, and difficult truth of how I came to reactively lay claim to my hetero marriage as a political choice as a means of countering the metronormativity that I encountered in

graduate school. Indeed, there is little room for my story in progressive domains because it does not readily conform to the interpretive framework of normative progressive political platforms. But it is an ordinary one, and a fairly common one, and progressive platforms would do well to make room for stories like this within their sphere. And yet, to do so would be to acknowledge that the affective structures we have learned in childhood do not allow us to “transgress” dominant social scripts as easily as we would like.

It has also been in returning to this site of memory, a site of rurality, that I have finally located a narrative that parallels my own. In fact, I found it in the context of the local YMCA at the precise moment that I was resigning myself to “being happy already” with my hetero life. I had signed up to take a couple of yoga classes (also a recent Glens Falls development, there was no yoga offered when I left the area ten years ago, and also a sign of my voluntary complacency with racialized, first worldist structures of power within this space). On the first day of class, I walked a soft butch yoga instructor, one of the first queer presenting women I had seen upon my return. In fact, for a moment I wondered if she was consciously queer identified, or if I was imposing my own metro norms upon her body. My interest was further piqued when I learned she had a seven-year-old daughter. Since she did not appear to be beyond her mid-twenties, so planned in vitro or adoption seemed unlikely.

Over coffee, I came to piece her story together. She moved here from South Carolina. She became pregnant in college. Her father is Jehovah’s Witness and she didn’t want to disappoint him. The baby’s father was graduating within a couple of

months, and if she married him she would have some sort of financial stability. Her now ex-husband's family lives in the Glens Falls area, and this is what brought her here. Joint custody is what keeps her here. And as conservative as it is here, she tells me, it is worlds beyond South Carolina.

As I sit listening attentively to the details of her life, I take comfort in her story. I find refuge in how it seems so ordinary: a college pregnancy, a subsequent marriage, a gender studies course, then divorce, followed by the coming out process. I am particularly struck by how calmly and assuredly she narrates her life events—how she is younger than I, and yet in the midst of Glens Falls, NY she has come to a place of acceptance and interpretive clarity that I am still trying to attain. How here in the midst of conservative rurality, she has undergone processes of memory work that reveal her to herself, that allow her to coherently narrate her journey to others, without the sense of shame and ambivalence that haunts my own.

In line with the dialogic post-positivist realist perspective that feminist polyvocal testimonios enact, it was by listening to her story that I have in turn come to recognize my own as quite ordinary. Her choice to marry her baby's father for economic security, and as a way of avoiding being shunned by her family, served as a much needed reminder that outside the spheres of progressive academia and political platforms that actively emphasize moments of transgression, normative discourses continue to shape and restrict people's life choices, even relatively privileged social subjects. This is especially true in relation to family formation and sexuality because of the economic consequences involved in such choices. The narration of her story served as a reminder that despite my

own location in progressive spheres, I am not a transcendent, or exceptional social subject, and how the geopolitical and ideological beginnings of my life continue to inform my present. Through this process of memory work I have also begun to envision new possibilities for how to organize my family's platonic mother, father, child unit that are not so limiting or hetero-nuclear in scope.

Too often in narrowly progressive spaces we perform as if we are above, outside of, separate from the social mores we critique. Or, we alternately "claim" certain convenient bits and pieces of ourselves, often in sterilized, sanitized, forms. We are careful to extract the messiness, to withhold certain subplots that would not pass tests of political approval. At the time I entered my graduate department, I did not advertise myself as being part of a "mixed orientation" marriage. Mostly because that language had not been made available to me. And even now, it is a descriptor that feels imposed. My sexuality was never a primary concern for me: it just was. Whereas my brother's gay identity asserted itself very early and quite strongly, I experienced my sexuality as fluid. It felt like a choice. Because of this, I did not devote years to perfecting my "identity" story.

I still don't have a narrative that seems sufficient for progressive politics: I loved a boy, although I do/did not only love boys, and from that affective connection, socially imposed expectations emerged. I came to realize my attraction to women within the bounds of this relationship, and because of my contentment with it, I did not feel that the realization of these desires were enough to cancel out the relationship we had built. And for a while all of these truths were able to coexist. I was able to put imposed expectations

at bay. But eventually the crown of progressive heterosexuality became heavy. Too heavy. Whereas I once thought of myself doing “hetero in drag,” I realized upon coming into my department that I had somehow unwittingly *become* it—the marriage, the house, the baby.

It has been painful to realize that intimately connected to my fear of the shame of divorce in relation to my traditional family is the shame I am experiencing in “coming out” to my friends late in life, and the fears I continue to harbor over how my previous hetero marriage and child from this relationship may in fact inhibit my belonging to this self-chosen group. And yet, confronting this too, has been helpful to the development of my political consciousness precisely in how these emotions fall outside the scope of progressive narratives of sexuality. Most important: as I write this, and through dialogue with my younger, rurally situated counterpart, I am already working to rewrite this fear.

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It is not just discourses of sexuality that I have struggled to negotiate as I straddle the worlds of progressive metronormative academia and my lower middle class rural upbringing, but discourses and assumptions of racialized class positionings as well. My former partner and I moved to the Twin Cities as a “young, professional couple.” This is probably how we would have advertised ourselves in the classifieds. A month later we bought a house. Three months later I discovered I was pregnant. I cried. Nine months later we had transformed into a struggling family, scrambling to pay for childcare and a mortgage. When my son was three months old the stock market crashed and the housing market collapsed. We spent the next four months brainstorming how to get out of our

financial situation. We met with HUD, but we were told our situation was not dire enough to receive immediate attention. We called Wells Fargo, our mortgage lender, and were given several dead end phone numbers. We filled out an application for HOPE for Homeowners, a federal loan modification program that we later discovered only led to one successful application. Two months later, we started foreclosure proceedings.

Out of a desperate need to make sense of our situation and the social contradictions it encapsulated, I reluctantly told some of my graduate school friends about the foreclosure, people I identified as having “good politics.” And yet, they were so far removed from my situation that while they empathized on an intellectual level, it was obvious that it was incomprehensible to them, and certainly confounded one-dimensional critiques of white, hetero, middle class privilege. In contrast, my then partner, while working at a socially conservative engineering firm told one of the higher ups about the foreclosure at his work, someone we identified as having “bad politics.” When my partner told him, he cried and actively restrained himself from giving my partner a hug.

In short, our situation was a white middle class nightmare: people would know, we would be exposed, our reputations thrown into question. Even as I recognized the rash of foreclosures as a structural issue, this did not mitigate my profound shame of defaulting on my mortgage, or my embarrassment at finding so personally ensnared by the capitalist structures my research critiqued. Indeed, all of this was taking place alongside my introduction to the world of feminist testimonio, in which I was gaining increased perspective on my geopolitical location in a larger worldscape. I also realized

that foreclosures were nothing new. The only thing “new” was whom they were affecting: the white middle class in record numbers. These obvious points of contradiction—of understanding myself as a privileged social subject in the midst of economic distress—were not easily reconciled. Rather, they remained as interpretive knots where my personal life choices and politics actively collided, and through which I struggled to allow myself to recognize my economic turmoil as valid while still taking responsibility for the social and material privileges I was afforded. While my distress was “real,” I also reminded myself that it was temporary and self-imposed.

It was only gradually through the world of MPR that we began to hear different versions of our story playing over the radio waves. Not the official stories reported by journalists, but the counternarratives of their interviewees and disgruntled callers. While the media just kept replaying the well-worn “what steps to take when facing foreclosure,” narrative, callers impatiently phoned in to say, “we’ve done all this. It’s not working. Nobody’s listening. Nobody’s helping.” Slowly, through the accumulating stories of anonymous homeowners in economic distress, we began to feel our shame melt away. We located ourselves within an imagined interpretive community constructed out of the fragmented calls of homeowners who were desperate and frustrated that the media was not reporting the information that would be most useful to us in our situations.

It was through this imagined community that we made the conscious choice to stop paying our mortgage. It was also through this process that I began to rethink what “agency” meant. In joining the ranks of other homeowners who chose to stop paying their mortgage when it became apparent the banks were not responsive to our situations,

we felt ourselves a part of decentralized collective action. Our “agency” then was over-determined in that we were affected by structural material conditions beyond our control, and yet we adapted to these conditions and acted strategically, for survival, in the face of them, as catalyzed by the counternarratives of callers we found through MPR, a subversive community that MPR unwittingly helped to build.<sup>84</sup> If we’ve taken the proper steps to be responsible in this situation and no one is stepping up to help us, so we reasoned, maybe something will happen if we all stop playing by the rules.

And yet, even as I narrate this I am profoundly aware of the imprints of racialized class privilege that are residually present in this account, and the sense of entitlement we felt in order to think that someone would help us. That we were important enough to be helped. Indeed, our very choice to take such a social and economic risk was informed by our confidence that even though our families were not affluent enough to throw money at our situation, if worse came to worse, we would have them to fall back on through other means of support.

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I have always loved circular narratives, and so it seems fitting that I am writing about life writing in a social space that shaped me in formative ways. It is not coincidental then that my continual reflections on what it means for me to find so much richness in the creative writing and theorizing of Women of Color feminists have led me

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<sup>84</sup> Recent populace campaigns such as “We are the 99%” and “It Gets Better” have proven themselves to be more focused attempts at creating communities of dissent through counternarrative. The most interesting aspect of these projects is how the expansive chorus of voices they incorporate often directly and indirectly critique each other. This polyphonic dimension performs a continual struggle for interpretive meaning, with participants contextualizing each other’s truth claims with slogans such as, “You might be the 99% in the US, but to the rest of the world you are the 1%,” or “It doesn’t get better, we get stronger,” thereby redefining the very projects in the process.

to further reflect on the role of storytelling in my own life trajectory. Through this process I have slowly, and cautiously, come to realize that my interest in “embodied theory”—and in life writing as a form of grounded social theorizing—is itself connected to being raised in an Irish-Catholic household where stories were a central way I learned to understand my world.

Growing up, stories were a primary way my family communicated with each other. My grandfather, whom I’ve always been very close with, and who wrote me weekly letters while I was in college telling me stories of his childhood (and which I have kept in a box as archival records), has always been a master storyteller. As children, my cousins and I would sit around and listen to him for hours.<sup>85</sup> The kitchen, and the kitchen table more specifically, was always a central gathering place for both my immediate and extended family. I took it for granted that this was how all families operated. Of course they shared stories. Of course this was how they communicated their perspectives with each other. I suppose I should have realized that this was not a cultural given when so many of my friends would tell me how much they enjoyed my family. Friends, who in

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<sup>85</sup> As I’ve grown older, my relationship with him has at once deepened, and become more fraught, mostly in relation to gender and generational factors. When I told my grandfather that I was pregnant, the first thing he said was, “It better not stand between you and your doctorate.” In this way, our relationship has always transcended the gender norms he has upheld in his relationships with my other female cousins, and in relation to the strict gendered division of labor he maintains in his relationship with my grandmother.

Still, Quinn’s birth, as well as my own developing feminist consciousness and political confidence has altered how we relate to each other. The past two summers Quinn and I have stayed at my mother’s home where my grandparents also reside in the summer in an in-law apartment, making it a four-generation household. Breakfast time is my grandparents’ favorite part of the day, with several courses and much reminiscing about times past. Pre-Quinn, I used to sit at the table soaking in their stories, indulging in the opportunity to spend so much quality time with them. The entrance of an on-the-move toddler, however, has altered this, as has my own increasing awareness of my grandfather’s increasing “floor time” in my grandparents’ storytelling sessions.

mid-adolescence wanted nothing to do with their own families, yet would come over on Friday and Saturday evenings to sit and share stories and laughter with my own.

Although it's taken me time to realize, this "swapping" of stories has deeply instilled in me a dialogic way of communicating that affects how I interact with others and relate to the world. In any given conversation, when someone tells a story, my mind immediately conjures up a story that relates to what that person is saying, whether it serves to reiterate their point, as a counter example, or both. When I tell my story, I don't offer it as a "last word," or in competition with the story the other party has conveyed, but as an extension of it. As a way of continuing the dialogue. I then, in turn, wait and expect that my own story will be reciprocated with a story by the other party in order to extend and reciprocate the social knowledge that I have conveyed through the telling of my own.

For me, this is a respectful form of interaction. A way of saying, "I not only hear what you are saying, I understand what you are saying, and here is how," by providing a concrete example of how I see their point playing out in my own daily life. It has become more and more apparent to me, however, that like everything else, this form of communication is not a cultural given; that my form of communicating is not understood by everyone I come into contact with. In fact, for those who did not grow up telling stories as part of their familial fabric, it can seem as a closing down, rather than as an opening up. Because rather than responding with direct questions, or a "that's interesting," my reciprocation is encoded in story form. It has only been through working

with feminist testimonios that I have come to recognize this process as an exercise in interpersonal reciprocity: as a thank you for sharing with me, I will share this with you.

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As I've suggested, when I first came to feminist testimonio, I did so to learn about material inequalities and women's lives whose daily realities differ from my own. This was an important first step in de-centering my worldview. However, as I opened myself to listen carefully to their stories, I began to hear how their insights extend beyond the specifics of their social situations, and to understand how they use their lives as a way in which to ground their knowledge claims and theorize about social relations. Because I grew up with stories as a central mode of conveying social knowledge, this story-based form of social critique struck a deep chord with me. Feminist testimonios enabled me to understand in a way that abstract theorizing did not. And yet, the social relationships they highlighted drastically differed from those I had been groomed to register. In this way, reading these works has served to actively rework my interpretive practices, as they have taught me how to tell new, and more accountable, stories about my social landscape.

Through my informal apprenticeship with feminist testimonios—and the accompanying process of unlearning and relearning, of coming to see differences differently—I have also come to understand the role of authorship in a more nuanced way. I have often been wary of narrating my life experiences, seeing them as only slight variations of white, middle social scripts, and have long considered the active withholding of my stories a more worthy political act. However, what feminist testimonio has enabled me to see is that the political salience of the writing project, while

certainly invested in cultivating a forum in which marginal experience narratives occupy the center sphere, is also more broadly a story-based methodology that shapes *how we tell our stories, and for what reasons*.

While those of us in more privileged social positions must always be aware of how the frameworks and scripts we use to convey our life experiences can serve to consolidate narratives of privilege and power, so too do we need to open ourselves to being vulnerable, and to expose our own sites of complicity and contradiction to processes of critique and analysis in order to forge successful, reciprocal cross-border alliances. Such dialogic practice is rooted in a post-positivist realist ethos that values epistemic diversity within self-chosen interpretive communities in order to arrive at more objective social truths, and to demystify relations of power to bring about meaningful social change. Indeed, socially privileged actors committed to social change must tell the truth of how social systems have informed our own lives, even—and especially—when these truths are ugly and uncomfortable, for they contain important pieces of social knowledge that are needed to disband, undermine, and alter oppressive power structures. Polyvocal feminist testimonials become important models for how to do so by beginning with the perspectives and experiences of those most oppressed. From here, they encourage readerships to take responsibility by recognizing how our stories differ from, while shedding light on, the circumscribed social relations of their marginal experience narratives. Regardless of social location, they teach all reading audiences how to read familiar social landscapes with new eyes. The interpretive dialogic processes they model within their narrative frame enable this two-step process.

In part then, feminist testimonios have shaped my work as a creative life writer so that I may utilize the particularities of my life—what my social location has afforded me to know, not know, why and how—in order to critique, rather than uphold, dominant power structures. As a politically engaged feminist scholar and teacher, they have allowed me to rethink the interconnections of academia and community, and what it means to be a public intellectual. They have certainly affected how I teach life writing narratives and where, how, and why I encourage students to try their own. In a more embodied, day-to-day way, the interpretive lessons of feminist testimonio prompt me to “author” my world differently through my interpersonal relationships and by influencing my daily actions and decisions, and altering my very beingness in the world.

\* \* \*

Communities of meaning, or interpretive communities, might not always be self-evident. They might not reside where we think they do. Affinity is more often born through social circumstance than claims to sameness, even if this is ideological sameness. *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, by The Personal Narratives Group, reminds us that while it might be most exciting to read and interpret the lives of women who actively resist social norms, to only work with these stories of transgression to the exclusion of stories of conformity is to do the feminist project a great disservice. Indeed, what life stories have the potential to remind us of is that life is richly complex. Things happen. We make decisions in response to imposed social circumstances and our lives rarely look like the ones we had once envisioned for ourselves. Thus, while “transgression” narratives will always excite progressive politics,

to solely focus on these accounts takes much needed attention away from our own complicities and entanglements with the social structures we critique.

Feminist polyvocal testimonios lay claim to the epistemological relevance of such entanglements, and the social knowledge they afford through careful dialogic analysis. They insist that we must enter those sites of messiness—and narrate them. Such processes force us to realize our own social locatedness, whether physical or imagined, and these realizations can also serve as a necessary catalyst for self-consciously creating communities of meaning in our own life capable of enabling alternative forms of affiliation and that counter social restriction with interpersonal expansion. As Kimberly Nance reminds us, testimonio may not change the world, but without multilayered resistance efforts, of which cultural resistance makes up an important part, we severely limit opportunities to bring about meaningful social change. While theoretically “impure,” the hybrid tactics of feminist testimonio insist upon a “differential” method (Sandoval) that allow us to “speak to back power” in relational, contextual, flexible registers. It is precisely the ordinariness of these stories, and their refusal to fit into predetermined social scripts—both conservative and progressive—that grants them with the power to change our thinking: restructuring society from the inside out.

To question what we do know and to come to understand what we do not know is to constantly stand on shaky ground. It is to find ourselves becoming familiarized with ideas that were once “foreign,” and to experience once familiar ideas becoming unrecognizable. It is a difficult process, imperfect, and one that does not allow for mastery. In nurturing a reading practice that actively facilitates such a space, however,

we encourage a dialogic process that calls upon the reader to grapple with the sociopolitical and epistemological questions raised by the text. Practitioners of testimonio dare their readers to open our imaginations and ourselves to the vulnerability that accompanies laying claim to the limits of our social knowledge.

In their commitment to alliance building they claim knowledge limits as a space to learn, a process that is enabled through sustained dialogic interaction with the text, and a recognition of the political responsibilities that come with what it means to occupy our social locations given the social information we have learned. Through their self-conscious use of pathos to affectively connect with diverse reading publics, they remind us that decolonizing social knowledge cannot be performed through mere intellectual exercise. Rather, feminist polyvocal testimonios insist that it is only when we open ourselves to a dialogic interpretive process wholly, honestly, and humbly that the subjective limits of partial perspective can be felt as a source of strength rather than threat. It is through the conscious workings through of social vulnerabilities on the part of both practitioners and readers of testimonio through which a fierce and lasting politics of hope and social equality are forged.

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