

THE AFTERLIFE OF TESTIMONIO  
DETECTIVE FICTION AND THE ARCHIVE IN CONTEMPORARY  
CENTRAL AMERICAN LITERATURE

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THE AFTERLIFE OF TESTIMONIO  
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This dissertation argues that the works of Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Horacio Castellanos Moya, and Rafael Menjívar Ochoa reveal the significant influence that *testimonio* has in Central American literature today. To begin with, their texts adopt and adapt the narrative and rhetorical conventions present in this form, often parodying or reconfiguring them in order to reveal the tensions and points of rupture in theorizations of canonical testimonial texts. *Testimonio*'s thematic and formal attributes, in turn, have permeated and been absorbed by the two main literary paths chosen by these writers in their fictional production. On the one hand, they have embraced the detective fiction genre—a thoroughly literary form in its use of well-defined conventions and tropes—in order to effectively dismantle the problematic assumptions of *testimonio*. On the other hand, their fictions have taken it upon themselves to contend with the archive—a site of discursive production and a depository of fragments belonging to the extraliterary realm alluded to in *testimonio*—and to adopt diverse archival logics in the process of their own construction.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Rodrigo Fuentes received his BA from the University of Pennsylvania, where he studied PPE (Politics, Philosophy, and Economics) and Comparative Literature. He went on to pursue a doctoral degree at Cornell University, where his research focuses on contemporary Central American literature.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2009, Beatriz Cortez published *La estética del cinismo*, an ambitious work of literary criticism which focused on contemporary Central American fiction. Cortez argued that a general disenchantment with the utopian and revolutionary projects of yore had led to a cultural production characterized by an esthetics of cynicism. The book drew from ideas developed in “Estética del cinismo: la ficción centroamericana de posguerra,” an article Cortez had presented in the *V Congreso Centroamericano de Historia* in San Salvador in 2000. As Perkowska notes in “La infamia de las historias y la ética de la escritura en la novela centroamericana contemporánea,” (2011) the article by Cortez “has been and still is heavily cited by critics of literature in the Isthmus” (1, my translation)<sup>1</sup>. A quick overview of contemporary Central American criticism attests to this fact: Misha Kokotovich (2003), Ana Patricia Rodríguez (2009), and Alexandra Ortiz Wallner (2012) have all relied to greater or lesser extent on Beatriz Cortez’ ideas in order to develop their own claims regarding the current state of narrative in the region.

*La estética del cinismo* provides an interesting frame through which to read contemporary Central American fiction. Particularly fruitful is Cortez’ rigorous mapping of the twists and turns of *testimonio* criticism as it attempts to resolve problematic issues of representation, as well as her discussions on the new spaces of subjectivity which these fictional narratives propose. Furthermore, she makes use of

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<sup>1</sup> “trabajo que ha sido y sigue siendo muy citado por los críticos de la literatura del Istmo”

an ample and heterogeneous corpus to test her hypotheses. Where this work falls short, however, is in its central claim. According to Cortez, in contemporary Central American fiction, passion moves the individual—as opposed to political or ideological motives—such that “The expression of this passion allows us to formulate an esthetic project for postwar Central America, an esthetics marked by the loss of faith in moral values and social projects of a utopian nature, in short, what I have called an esthetics of cynicism” (31)<sup>2</sup>. While her definition of this cynicism and concurrent passion is based on brisk readings of Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche (102-104), an actual framework for understanding how such states of mind and body are incorporated into an esthetics is never developed. Esthetics, on the contrary, seems to point vaguely to common thematic concerns, and perhaps to a particular sensibility evident in the fictions discussed (23). The “esthetics of cynicism” therefore appears to be more concerned with a cynicism towards esthetics—that is, a loss of faith in the productive possibilities of readings focusing on the formal aspects of these texts. Despite arguing that the political and thematic inclinations harbored by contemporary fiction are no longer those of testimonial texts, it seems that *Estética del cinismo* perpetuates some of the ticks present in traditional *testimonio* criticism. That is, when providing close readings of the works under discussion, it does so largely to develop localized theories of subjectivity, as well as to link the texts, and read them in relation to, current socio-historical circumstances in Central America.

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<sup>2</sup> “La expresión de esta pasión nos permite formular un proyecto estético para la Centroamérica de posguerra, una estética marcada por la pérdida de la fe en los valores morales y en los proyectos sociales de tipo utópico, en resumen, lo que he llamado una estética del cinismo”



This dissertation takes this perceived lack as a point of departure. It does so by focusing on the rhetorical devices and narrative conventions of *testimonio*. Suffice it to say for now that *testimonios* are first-person narratives written by a transcriber who inscribes the oral account granted by a subaltern. Works like *Si me permiten hablar...* (1977), by Bolivian Domitila Barrios de Chungara, or *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983), by Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú, are emblematic examples of this kind of writing. These are underprivileged subaltern speakers who draw from their lives in order to share a significant experience, usually addressing a situation of urgency and often referring to the human rights abuses to which they have been subjected. *Testimonio* can therefore be understood as a denunciation, a plea, an act of identity formation and, also, as a story. This last characterization is of central importance to this dissertation because a story, like all literary texts, is based on a series of rhetorical and narrative mechanisms which allow it to function in very particular ways.

The following investigation is not concerned directly with *testimonios* such as the ones previously mentioned, but rather with the formal features present in texts of this nature. Such formal features, as it is, have been teased out and theorized by academics mostly writing from American universities. Despite these kinds of readings, however, textual analyses have usually taken a backstage as the referential, extraliterary dimensions alluded to by *testimonio* demanded a different kind of critical approach. In other words, the ethical implications of these texts seemed to trump and render trivial at best, or downright ill-willed at worst, any concern with their esthetic

attributes. Yet these attributes have outlived *testimonio*'s heyday, and are alive and present in current fictional production in Central America.

*The Real Thing*, a collection of essays edited by Georg M. Gugelberger and published in 1996, brought together a diverse array of theorizations involving *testimonio*. It included works by the most prominent critics of the form, and strove to situate it at a time when cultural and political conditions were already very different to those which had given rise to canonical *testimonios*. Referring to *The Real Thing*, Jon Beasley-Murray tellingly stated that “If this is *testimonio*'s wake, many of the key players in the debates that it generated have turned up to give it a decent burial” (122). *Testimonio*'s cultural relevance certainly seemed to have waned at that point.

This dissertation argues that the works of Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Horacio Castellanos Moya, and Rafael Menjívar Ochoa prove otherwise. Although writing from very different loci of enunciation— these are not subalterns, and neither do they focus on the political impact or denunciatory possibilities of their texts —, their fictional accounts reveal the significant influence that *testimonio* has in Central American literature today. To begin with, their works adopt and adapt the narrative and rhetorical conventions present in *testimonio*, often parodying or reconfiguring them for the sake of the authors' particular narrative programs. *Testimonio*'s thematic and formal attributes, in turn, have permeated and been absorbed by the two main literary paths chosen by these writers in their fictional production. On the one hand, they have embraced the detective fiction genre—a thoroughly literary form in its use of well-defined conventions and tropes—in order to effectively dismantle the problematic assumptions of *testimonio*. On the other hand,

their fictions have taken it upon themselves to contend with the archive—a site of discursive production and a depository of fragments belonging to the extraliterary realm alluded to in *testimonio*—and to adopt diverse archival logics in the process of their own construction.

Chapter 1 offers a theoretical overview of *testimonio*. In order to do so, it traces the development of testimonial narratives back to Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966), a work referred to by its author as a *novela-testimonio*. It is significant that such a text would be denominated in this manner, indicating the awareness of a literary dimension already at work in *testimonio* at this early stage. The eminently violent, yet thoroughly extraliterary reality *testimonio* purportedly addressed, was to be a point of contention throughout the following decades. Critics dealing with the form attempted to distinguish *testimonio* from other kinds of texts, as the undeniably real and urgent circumstances it spoke of were otherwise in danger of being absorbed by a hegemonic literary-critical system. Such absorption would subject *testimonio* to uncomfortable questions dealing with its condition as a representation, and would also draw attention to the problematic issues of mediation arising from the presence of a transcriber in the construction of such narratives.

The essays included in *The Real Thing*, along with texts by John Beverley (1990, 2004), Alberto Moreiras (1996, 2001), Elzbieta Sklodowska (1992, 2000), and Elizabeth Bartow (2005) provide the groundwork for a conceptual elaboration of *testimonio* and a discussion of the tensions and points of rupture in canonical *testimonio* criticism. A rhetoric of *testimonio* is teased out from these texts and discussed in reference to *Biografía de un cimarrón* and to two paradigmatic

testimonial works by Elena Poniatowska—*Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) and *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971). After charting a literary history of *testimonio*, the chapter addresses the manner in which the works of fiction of the three Central American authors discussed in this dissertation adopt narrative and rhetorical conventions of *testimonio*. In fact, this discussion is carried against the grain, for these authors incorporate such conventions despite their own explicit intentions.

“Ningún lugar sagrado,” (1998) the story which gives its name to the collection by Rodrigo Rey Rosa, speaks to the questionable power relations which inhabit transcriber-speaker negotiations in *testimonio*. Issues of sincerity and textual mediation are articulated through a patient-therapist conversation which takes place in the latter’s office in New York City.. *Que me maten si...* (1997), also by the Guatemalan author, addresses the complex function of silence in testimonial narratives, and points to the suspect political location of those who deal with *testimonio* while occupying positions of privilege. *El Asco* (1997), by Horacio Castellanos Moya, toys with notions of veracity through an account in which issues of sympathy and representativity are turned on their head. The novel parodies *testimonio*, as the subject of enunciation attacks his community by employing an ethnographic discourse of eugenicist connotations. Finally, Menjívar Ochoa’s *Historia del traidor del nunca jamás* functions as a performative piece as it reveals the misreadings to which well-intentioned critics subjected the novel—misreadings that the author had originally envisioned in the construction of the text and which ultimately came back to haunt him.

The novels analyzed in Chapter 2 take on the formal conventions of the detective fiction genre in order to dismantle problematic assumptions of *testimonio*. They do so by focusing on the position of witnesses who grant testimonies in reference to particularly vicious crimes. On the one hand, these subjects of enunciation hold problematic and often antagonistic relationships with the communities to which they belong, thus subverting the conventionally metonymic relationship testimonial subjects had with the collective bodies they spoke for. On the other hand, such witnesses are portrayed in a far less pristine light than are those of traditional *testimonio*. In doing so, the works of Rey Rosa, Menjívar Ochoa, and Castellanos Moya explore and question the processes that endow these witness accounts with legitimacy. The chapter begins by offering a conceptual elaboration of detective fiction—particularly the hard-boiled variant and its adoption by Latin American fiction in the form of the *neopolicial*—concomitantly addressing the points of contact between this genre and *testimonio*.

A kind of transposition is at work in these novels: legitimacy is shifted from the loci of enunciation of witnesses, where it purportedly resides in traditional *testimonio*, and is displaced to the positions occupied by their addressees. In Menjívar Ochoa's *Los años marchitos* (1990), the protagonist is a voice-actor whose talent is put at the service of parallel structures of power, given that his ability to impersonate any voice allows him to falsify witness accounts. In this sense, the bond linking witness and testimony is severed, and the specificity of the testimony's site of production is undermined. In *De vez en cuando la muerte* (2002), by the same author, the narrator is a journalist who recognizes that testimony is valuable only as long as it

can circulate in an economy of sensationalist news pieces. An unorthodox articulation of *testimonio*, detective fiction, and science fiction is at work in Rey Rosa's *Cárcel de árboles* (1991). The novel describes a surgical and psychological experiment which removes prisoners' ability to speak and think, thus allowing the military to have absolute control over a concentration camp located in the jungle. It is only through the process of writing that such prisoners are able to regain their capacity to think; it is only by reading one of their diaries, too, that an unknowing doctor is able to unravel the mystery surrounding their deaths. Castellanos Moya's *La diabla en el espejo* (2000) and *El arma en el hombre* (2001), are first-person accounts dealing with murders in which the narrators renounce any solidarity with, and in fact attack, the communities to which they belong. In both cases, unexpected endings reveal addressees who reconfigure an understanding of the incentives at work in the protagonists' accounts. Both of these works suggest that processes of investigation should perhaps be directed at the interlocutors and the positions of privilege they occupy, as opposed to those who provide their accounts and have witnessed violent crimes.

Chapter 3 addresses the presence and operations of the archive in three texts, each corresponding to one of the authors discussed in this dissertation. Different archives appear throughout these works, and all of them refer, in one way or another, to the civil wars which assailed the region during the second half of the XX century. The archive in this chapter functions in two main ways: firstly, as the depository of documents and texts which attest to the violence of state-sponsored violence, and secondly, as a site of discursive production. The theoretical development of the

relationship between narrative and the archive draws primarily from *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Literature* (1990), by Roberto González Echeverría, and *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (1999), by Idelber Avelar. The central argument is that in order to engage with these diverse archives –to undertake a narrative based on the material housed within them– the three texts adopt an archival logic.

*El material humano* (2009), by Rodrigo Rey Rosa, deals with the discovery in Guatemala City in 2005 of the Archive belonging to the now extinct National Police. As the narrator embarks on a labyrinthine investigation of the documents housed within it, he is faced with the difficult task of affording narrative order to the archival chaos he encounters. In order to do so, the novel opposes its own formal logic of dispersion to that of the archive: that is, it challenges the classificatory and purportedly scientific system at work in the Police Archive, in turn revealing the fictive underpinnings that uphold the legitimacy of the state's repressive apparatus. *Tiempos de locura* (2006), a work of nonfiction by Menjívar Ochoa, deals with the 'times of madness' which defined El Salvador between 1979 and 1981, a period of acute instability in government and society in general. The text adopts conventions of the *crónica*—an eclectic genre of archival impetus—in order to render the documents and archival fragments found by the author with coherence and narrative tension. Finally, the narrator in Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (2004) is trusted with editing a report elaborated by the Catholic Church, which includes the testimonies of indigenous victims and survivors of the civil war of an unknown country closely resembling Guatemala. As a man of acute esthetic sensibility and null political correctness, he

focuses solely on the poetic attributes of these texts. Soon enough he begins to suffer from paranoia, internalizing and even acting out the horrific crimes described. The novel therefore addresses the performative potential of these testimonies' literary dimension, and draws attention to the specter of prosopopeia which constantly haunts *testimonio* criticism.

This dissertation relies on secondary sources for conceptual elaborations when needed, but strives to draw out theories for analyzing these texts from the primary texts themselves. Close readings, and a focus on the formal attributes in the works discussed, are therefore of central importance. Additionally, I conducted interviews of Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Horacio Castellanos Moya, and Elena Poniatowska, and have annexed the corresponding transcriptions at the end of this dissertation. Though brief, these interviews offer a glimpse into the authors' thoughts regarding the construction of their own works of fiction. Unfortunately, Rafael Menjivar Ochoa passed away in 2011, but he did keep a blog during the seven years prior to his death. *Tribulaciones y asteriscos*, as the blog was called, still floats along in digital waters, a spectral kind of testimony attesting to the author's thoughts on literature and life.



## CHAPTER ONE

### THE AFTERLIFE OF TESTIMONIO

The title of this dissertation is burdened with an original sin: is it even possible to speak of an afterlife of *testimonio* when the very concept of *testimonio* rests on such volatile theoretical grounds? The ideas outlined in this chapter do not attempt to reaffirm the reader's faith in the possibility of a text beyond the confines of representation. Nor do they deal directly with the manner in which "testimonio might be understood as part of the agency of the subaltern" (Beverley xvi). Apart from identifying key moments in its literary and critical production, as well as teasing out some of its most distinct narrative features, *testimonio* –in its diverse conceptual frameworks– will only serve as a starting point for this project. *Testimonio* shall be understood as a kind of phantasmagoric rhetoric,<sup>3</sup> a literary map that underlies some of the central fictional texts in the corpus of Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Horacio Castellanos Moya, and Rafael Menjívar Ochoa. On the one hand, these works both depend on and complicate the narrative structures and rhetorical devices present in *testimonio*. As such, they reveal the significant influence of testimonial writing on contemporary Central American fiction, and the manner in which certain extra-literary concerns and their resulting narrative strategies have seeped into strictly literary production. On the other hand, these works of fiction function as critiques of criticism itself; that is, they

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<sup>3</sup> Rhetoric is here used in the terms of Paul de Man's "Rhetoric and Semiology" (1973) -as tropes and figures of speech.

act as distorted mirrors that reveal or exacerbate the tensions and points of rupture in theorizations of canonical testimonial texts.

All three authors discussed in this chapter write against *testimonio*. When an interviewer informed Rodrigo Rey Rosa that some would describe his work as testimonial, the author responded: “Me? No! For me, literature functions more as work of self-criticism, let’s say it’s the opposite of *testimonio*” (Rey Rosa)<sup>4</sup>. Relevant here, first and foremost, is the reproduction of the binary configuration that pits the literary against *testimonio*. Despite acknowledging that a canonical testimonial text like *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* “has the characteristics of a literary narration” (Menjívar Ochoa; 2009)<sup>5</sup>, it seems that for Rey Rosa the province of *testimonio*, so to speak, was considered detached from the literary realm. In addition, Rey Rosa’s description of literature as “a work of self-criticism” reveals a kind of self-reflexivity underlying his understanding of fictional texts. As will be discussed further, his works put in motion narrative and rhetorical mechanisms that remit to and undermine the conventions of testimonial production. Castellanos Moya’s offers a more acerbic and perhaps simplistic take regarding *testimonio*, arguing that “The weight of *testimonio* literature is directly related to the level of ignorance that existed in those countries”, adding that “then it’s very easy for a bunch of American academics to decide: ‘this is it and this is what’s going on now, lets take the dumbest ones and make them think they’re the smartest’. Then that’s what really happened”

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<sup>4</sup> ¿A mí? ¡No! La literatura para mí es más bien un trabajo de autocrítica, digamos que es lo contrario de lo testimonial”.

<sup>5</sup> “tiene las características de una narración literaria”

(Carini and Foppa 134)<sup>6</sup>. For Castellanos Moya, *testimonio*'s prominence in the region had to do with the fact that fiction was barely read at all, while something like *testimonio* was able to suggest answers for questions of a political nature which were closer to the readers' experiences. On his part, Menjívar Ochoa allies himself with the words of Roque Baldovinos, a Salvadorean critic who sardonically claimed that "Testimonio lacks literary pretensions because it's 'more than literary'. Testimonio happens to be a textual practice which transcends the asphyxiating limits of artistic autonomy, to become, in a few words, art turned into life" (95)<sup>7</sup>. As the form which Baldovinos so cheekily deems "art turned into life," *testimonio* was to be conceived of as existing outside the literary institution, and therefore beyond the jurisdiction of literary critiques. Rey Rosa's description of literature as self-critical is quite telling in this regard, as it implies a kind of blindness surrounding *testimonio*, a manner in which the form avoids awareness of its own conditions of possibility. This chapter therefore proposes a reading of these authors against the grain. It not only shows how *testimonio*'s assumptions and conventions are challenged in their work, often parodied or reconfigured. It also reveals the manner in which *testimonio*'s strategies have trickled into their own fictional narratives despite their best intentions or, analogously, how certain misreadings engendered by *testimonio* criticism are thematized in their fictional accounts.

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<sup>6</sup> "El peso de la literatura de testimonio está en razón directa al nivel de opresión y de ignorancia que había en esos países", "entonces es muy fácil que un montón de académicos estadounidenses decidan: 'aquí es y ésta es la moda, agarremos a los más tontos y hagámosles creer que son los más listos'. Entonces esto es lo que pasó realmente"

<sup>7</sup> "El testimonio carece de pretensiones literarias porque es 'más que literario'. El testimonio resulta ser una práctica de escritura que trasciende los asfixiantes límites de la autonomía artística, para convertirse, en pocas palabras, arte vuelto vida"

A brief look into the etymology of *testimonio* illustrates the link between *testimonio* and “testis” –Latin for witness–, as well as with “martyrion”. In her study of the rhetorical and political significance of silence in Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio*, Doris Sommer asserts that “bearing witness has been a sacred responsibility throughout Christianity, which is why witnesses are martyrs etymologically and historically” (115). The referential possibilities of testimonial accounts were granted a sacred space by *testimonio* criticism, particularly in light of the undeniable political urgency that accompanied the production of many such texts. Alberto Moreira’s articulation of *testimonio*’s relationship to its referent is therefore worth noting, remitting to a quasi-religious rather than textual experience. In “The Aura of Testimonio” (1996), he states that “Testimonio provides its reader with the possibility of entering what we might call a subdued sublime: the twilight region where the literary breaks off into something else, which is not so much the real as it is its unguarded possibility” (195). This passage shows Moreiras engaging in theoretical pyrotechnics as he attempts to hold onto the extraliterary dimension of *testimonio*. The attacks on *testimonio* had cornered sympathetic academics into the positions displayed in the essays included in *The Real Thing* (1996). As Jon Beasley-Murray notes in “Thinking Solidarity: Latinamericanist Intellectuals and *Testimonio*”, “this collection offers itself as a sober post-mortem on the moment now passed, bringing us back down to earth and to ‘the real thing’ after the heady euphoria of the days when *testimonio*, and with it Latinamericanism achieved a measure of public notoriety and attracted a certain enthusiastic attention” (122). Despite some astute rhetorical and conceptual maneuvers—particularly in the works of Moreiras, Yúdice, and Sommer—

, it is impossible not to feel these critics backpedalling in the collected essays, packing their theoretical toolkits, so to speak, as they retreated to less ambitious positions (Skłodowska seems to be one of the few exceptions, remaining consistent with her earlier, significantly more measured approach to *testimonio*). Moreiras, in turn, offered critical readings on problematic arguments espoused by fellow *testimonio* critics, particularly those of Sommer and Yúdice. While he attempted to disentangle some of these knotty theoretical elaborations, his insistence on the “twilight region” glimpsed through testimonial texts retained a whiff of nostalgia for the originary conceptual household of *testimonio*.

Two years later, Rey Rosa would desacralize said twilight region in “Ningún lugar sagrado” (1998), a short story that stages a dialogue between an American psychologist and her Guatemalan patient. Issues of sincerity, legitimacy, and textual mediation—problematic conventions in the realm of *testimonio*—are enacted in the story through the portrayal of a professional relationship that quickly transitions into a libidinal exchange. Before embarking on an analysis of Rey Rosa’s work, however, we will outline some of main narrative conventions of *testimonio*. The work of Elzbieta Skłodowska (1992) and Joanna Bartow (2005), as well as some of the essays gathered in *The Real Thing* (1996), will provide most of the theoretical framework needed to suggest the rhetorical and narrative operations at play in *testimonio*. Elena Poniatowska’s *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (1969) and *La Noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) prove good starting points in addressing both issues of transcription and mediation as well as notions of the collective body and its metaphoric or metonymic relation to the particular texts at hand. The years of these texts’ publication also coincide, to a certain

extent, with the formative years of *testimonio*—a period in which Miguel Barnet published *Biografía de un Cimarrón* (1966) along with the essay “La novela-testimonio: socioliteratura” (1969), and La Casa de las Américas instituted *testimonio* as a new category open for award.

Of course, the notion of a formative period is already laden with a claim to origins that can be effectively challenged. Sklodowska recounts the way in which, taking into account Barnet’s essay on the *novela-testimonio*, one could argue that such works assume a degree of historical authenticity similarly present in a variety of previous texts, mentioning as examples the *crónicas* of the Spanish conquistadores, Fernández de Lizardi’s *El Periquillo Sarniento*, and Ernesto Guevara’s diaries, among many others. She goes on to assert that “even though the testimonial form employs several means by which to gain in veracity and authenticity –among them the first person point of view –witness–, the play between fiction and history inexorably shows up as a problem” (“Aproximaciones” 28)<sup>8</sup>.

At this point, Barnet is still addressing the *novela-testimonio*—not strictly *testimonio*—although many of his claims were to be later adapted and adopted into *testimonio* academic parlance. Yet given the alleged objectivity of his ethnographic method, the denomination chosen for this kind of text—*novela-testimonio*—reveals the very self-conscious writing it involved, and the explicitly literary features in the form from an early point. Although he rejected a claim to literature in *Biografía de un cimarrón* (González Echeverría 168), Barnet considered himself a poet above all

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<sup>8</sup> “aunque la forma testimonial emplea varios recursos para ganar en veracidad y autenticidad –entre ellos el punto de vista de la primera persona-testigo-, el juego entre ficción e historia aparece inexorablemente como un problema”

(Skłodowska, “Aproximaciones” 28), and his insistence on the mediatory role of the writer/transcriber and the formal and aesthetic import of such intervention is relevant before addressing the particular mediatory figures in Poniatowska’s work.

Amy Naus Millay’s *Voices from the fuente viva* proves helpful in this regard, as it dissects the textual strategies sought by Barnet to lend legitimacy to *Biografía de un Cimarrón*, as well as to the process leading up to its publication. From the start, Millay focuses on *testimonio*’s characteristic incorporation of multiple discourses and on the problematic power relations involved in its production. This form, she argues, should be conceived of “as a complex form of cross-cultural communication, fraught with the tension arising from the unequal political positions of the coproducers of the text. A crucial part of testimonial writing is the invention of a narrator-informant who represents collective experience” (Millay 122). Her use of the word *informant* already reveals the brittle ground on which testimonial subjects stand. As such, their condition as authors of the text seems questionable, and the power relation between testimonial subject and transcriber become politically suspect. Perhaps more importantly, describing the narrator-informant as an *invention* draws attention to the rhetorical strategies by which traditional testimonial collaborations are turned into apparently univocal, oral accounts, transparently transmitting a significant life event.

Certainly, Barnet attempted to distance *Biografía* from literary traditions in order to grant it greater authority. The book’s paratextual elements<sup>9</sup>, Barnet’s claim that the process of investigation was based on an ethnographic model, and the

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<sup>9</sup> Among these, Millay points out the “unassuming cover, a photograph of the subject, an explanatory prologue written by the ethnographer and composed in the voice of an authoritative “we,” editorial notes, and a glossary of terms” (125).

insistence on the oral quality of the account all serve to legitimize Montejo's story. In fact, Barnet's "ability to contrive spoken discourse in writing was his primary means of creating a pervasive sense of linguistic reality" (Millay 127). Of course, as Jorge Marcone has showed in *La oralidad escrita: sobre la reivindicación y la reinscripción del discurso oral* (1997), the inscription of an oral account is, after all, a particular interpretation of an oral discourse, rather than a transparent reproduction of the spoken word (77) –one which paradoxically strives to divest itself of the written word on which it simultaneously depends (47). In turn, Barnet's editing of Montejo's account resulted in a carefully constructed, strategically unified version of the former slave's life through the careful manipulation of his oral account. Barnet's desire to transplant Montejo's original voice into the testimonial text ultimately revealed the ethical complications and mimetic limitations of such an endeavor. In the end, "Montejo's seamless narrative and his performative storytelling are a fiction masquerading as objective discourse" (Millay 140), one which reflects Barnet's desire to constitute himself as mediator between ethnographic methods and literary technique.

The notion of presence of the witness and, analogously, of presence of experience in the narrated events, has also been a central concern for *testimonio* criticism. In "The Margin at the Center" (1989), Beverley notes that in *testimonio* "We are meant to experience both the speaker and the situations and events recounted as real" (33). In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur addresses the "The typical formulation of [juridical and historical] testimony proceeds from this pairing: I was there. What is attested to is indivisibly the reality of the past thing and the presence of



the narrator at the place of its occurrence” (Ricoeur, 163). The works of the three authors discussed in this chapter play with this central convention in *testimonio*. What constitutes a witness and how does the attestation of presence legitimize witness account? What kinds of legitimizing strategies produce the illusion of presence which testimonial texts strive to achieve? How do the subjects of enunciation relate to the wider communities with which they purportedly share common narratives?

Different conceptualizations of *testimonio* have frequently given rise to problematic taxonomic straitjackets. As shown by Joanna Bartow (2005), it is precisely in the tensions and contradictions found between different theorizations, as well as in the resistance offered by certain texts to such frameworks, that the most productive areas of inquiry can be found. According to George Yúdice, “testimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc)”. He points out the oral, popular quality of testimonial discourse, and the fact that “the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity” (44). In other words, the relationship between testimonial subject and collective entity, according to Yúdice, functions along metonymic rather than metaphoric lines. Among more traditional theorizations is Beverley and Zimmerman’s definition –a classic albeit controversial one– which identifies *testimonio* as

a novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts. The unit of narration is usually a significant life episode [and] the production of *testimonio* generally involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of

an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, writer, or social activist (86).

Sklodowska addresses both definitions in “Spanish American testimonial novel” (1996), and argues that the two of them focus on *testimonio*’s political engagement, which limits the study of “its discursive armature. In strictly formal terms, it is simply perceived as a curious brand of life document, autobiography, and forensic patterns of confession, which takes the form of a novel” (86). Some of the points shared by these definitions will be discussed in relation to the fictional texts at hand, including the presence of a mediatory figure between text and testimonial subject; the urgency of the situation which triggers the narration; and the assumption that the testimonial subject was *there* to witness the events, along with the presumption of veracity which accompanies presence.

To start, the work of Elena Poniatowska illustrates some of these central tensions. *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) and *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) constitute pivotal moments in the production of testimonial narrative, particularly since Poniatowska proposed two very distinct models with which to engage the voices of marginal communities. In order to grant the spotlight to the subaltern or marginalized community, Poniatowska became “the center which then leaves the stage so that others may speak (...). By means of many testimonies and other ‘oral’ and written fragments, we get to know the ‘characters’, the stage, the themes, and the audience of this real drama” (Taylor 37). The performative element implicit in Taylor’s language reveals the highly constructed quality of these texts. In fact, there is a staging carried out by Poniatowska—the author legitimizes a space of dissent which

is then ceded to those who would otherwise not have access to it. For some, “Elena Poniatowska’s work recoups silenced voices and poses an effective challenge to official history in such a way that hierarchies of signification and authority are deconstructed and not merely reversed” (Jorgensen 76). By placing different discursive practices side by side in *La noche de Tlatelolco*—graffiti fragments, newspaper clippings, protest banners, witness descriptions, the accounts from those in power—, the text managed to create a space where the official version was called into question. Sklodowska takes a more measured approach, pointing out the unstable nature of Poniatowska’s text thanks to “her demystifying attempt regarding, on one hand, official propaganda, and her distrust of language, on the other hand, as a mimetic instrument” (159)<sup>10</sup>. Central to Poniatowska’s texts, therefore, was the contestation of official accounts, but also an awareness of the limitations of language as a vehicle for transparent expression. Both of these issues would become essential aspects of testimonial narratives, the latter often overlooked by early testimonial criticism.

*Hasta no verte, Jesús Mío* is Elena Poniatowska’s stylized transcription of the oral account of Josefina Bórquez, a laundry woman she interviewed at length and eventually grew close to. It is a testimonial narrative with a transcriber that vanishes behind the testimonial subject’s voice, thus embracing the ethical complications implied in the possibility of textual ventriloquism. On the other hand, the testimonial subject—Jesusa Palancares, as Bórquez is referred to in the text—occasionally defies the authority of the meddling transcriber and strategically enforces silence, in turn

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<sup>10</sup> “su tentativa desmitificadora con respecto a la propaganda oficial por un lado, y a su desconfianza para con el lenguaje en cuanto instrumento mimético por el otro”

challenging notions of sympathy and veracity associated with the form. The famous reaction to the transcriber's intrusive presence with which the novel ends illustrates this well: "Stop fucking around. Leave. Let me sleep" (304)<sup>11</sup>. As Bartow suggests, drawing from Sommer's work, Jesusa's resistant silence is both a strong stance against authority and a "rhetorical device that draws out the many self-contradictions in this and other testimonial texts" (39). But such contradictions are constitutive to *testimonio* in general, as these are texts that aim to grant authority to the voice of an other through a mediatory presence that already cuts and frames the narrative at hand. This tension leaves Jesusa to use "solitude and silence as a resistance tactic, as a diversion that must be contradicted by testimonial speech, which in turn disguises the silences its discursive requirements produce" (Shaw 44).

Issues of mediation and the relationship between testimonial subject and collectivity are addressed quite differently in *La Noche de Tlatelolco*, a polyphonic account dealing with the Mexican state's massacre of students in 1968. In this text, a multiplicity of voices and mediums are incorporated into a kind of collective testimonial symphony. *La Noche de Tlatelolco* provides one of the most radical examples of formal experimentation with testimonial narratives, given that the notion of a univocal subject of truth is dismantled through the inclusion of fragments of interviews, street graffiti, news articles, protest banners and chants, among other discursive mediums. This fragmentation serves a strategic function, as "The montage form with its juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements creates a multilayered vision fraught with gaps, discrepancies, and contradictions, as well as startling moments of

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<sup>11</sup> "Ahora ya no chingue. Váyase. Déjeme dormir"

unanimity and consensus” (Jorgensen 78). The account resists the notion of a totalizing version of events, collapsing discursive hierarchies and placing forms of popular expression side by side with official statements and mass media reports.

Nevertheless, *La noche de Tlatelolco* is deeply dependent upon narrative mechanisms, even if such mechanisms are veiled by the text’s fragmentary layout. Immediately following the front cover, the reader is exposed to a series of photographs that depict the initial days of the student protests and the eventual repression by the state. The photographs attest to a certainty of presence that *testimonio* strives for; they provide a narrative—through a chronological display of twelve photographs—that substantiates the events to be discussed. The referential quality of photography therefore binds and sustains, a priori, a narrative of apparently fragmentary and dispersed discursive forms.

*La noche de Tlatelolco* thus reveals the tension at play between the referential tyranny of the image and the logic of dispersion in the subsequent collage of accounts. Kathy Taylor describes how “The absent or perhaps invisible author–narrator is hidden there in the pauses between the testimonies” (Taylor 36), and yet an organizational and explanatory impetus is already at work even before such testimonies, with the sequence of pictures that precede the text. Photography and narrative are simultaneously competing and complementary mediums in *La noche de Tlatelolco*. Narrative is indeed necessary for understanding since, as Susan Sontag argues in *On Photography*, “understanding is based on how [something] functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand”, such that “Strictly speaking, one can never

understand anything from a photograph” (23). And yet a rhetoric of photography is also present in the particular framing or the particular lighting at work— in the formal choices which dismantle photography’s claim to objectivity and that show it “cannot be simply a transparency of something that happened. It is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude” (Sontag, *Regarding* 46). This inevitable process of framing and exclusion is similarly present in the fragments Poniatowska selects for her account.

Miguel Barnet’s *Biografía de un Cimarrón* would come to reveal the strategic positioning of the transcriber/mediator in his attempt to grant voice to the voiceless. The ethnographic approach used by Barnet attempted to legitimize the process leading to the publication of the former slave’s account, while simultaneously utilizing the editorial tampering necessary to provide a unified, teleological account. Poniatowska’s *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, written ten years after *Biografía*, attempted a similar feat in its desire to grant the subaltern with the spotlight. Both of these projects involved the recovery of an originally revolutionary voice. Josefina Bórquez had participated in the Mexican Revolution herself and “Barnet acknowledged that he significantly altered the order of the transcriptions to construct a chronological story that dovetailed with key moments in Cuban history” (Millay 143). However, while Barnet hid behind an ethnographic discourse, Josefina Bórquez’ interventions and recriminations in *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* drew attention to the process of negotiation between testimonial subject and transcriber. In *La noche de Tlatelolco*, the fragmentary layout provided a series of contending discursive practices, which in turn revealed the inability of a

cohesive storyline to account for a traumatic event—in this case, the massacre of 1968.

These works illuminate two tensions found in *testimonio*, both of which are addressed in contemporary Central American fiction. One refers to the problematic relationship between transcriber and testimonial subject, and includes the precarious claim to authority which the latter is granted. The second has to do with the exhaustion of narrative as a cohesive means of transmitting ineffable experiences. As will be further discussed, the selected texts point to the impossibility of texts, including those of *testimonio*, to be true to themselves. This does not mean that the claim of an extratextual situation of urgency is radically suspended, but rather that as texts, these works deploy literary mechanisms that undermine explicit claims to their purported veracity. It is in this sense that Rey Rosa's assertion that literary texts are those which perform "a work of self-criticism" seems particularly relevant. By undermining their claim to a particular kind of authority, these texts draw attention to the processes that legitimize them.

A frequently discussed predicament of the politics of solidarity as embraced by subaltern studies was that "a transnational politics of coalition or horizontality between Latin American subaltern and First World academic production" was at risk of "succumbing to fetishistic modes of intellectual labor, or of implementing implicitly vertical political matrix in their projects of horizontalist solidarity formation" (Williams 229). Castellanos Moya's *El Asco* enacts precisely this problematic dynamic by presenting an academic who returns to El Salvador after a self-imposed exile, with the sole purpose of claiming an inheritance left by his

deceased mother. Moya, a fiction writer, transcribes Edgardo Vega's oral account, vividly describing the days of sheer terror and disgust he has endured while waiting in his former homeland for the corresponding paperwork to be sorted out. Vega has renounced his Salvadorean nationality in favor of a Canadian passport, and when he speaks of his former community, it is only to denigrate and attack it. *El asco* provides a biting parody of traditional testimonial forms through an essentialist ethnographic discourse, one which dismisses any possibility of a politics of solidarity.

*Testimonio's* mimetic endeavor is in fact what constitutes it as a textual form ripe for parody. Both *testimonio* and parody rely on an outside referent; however, while *testimonio* appeals to an extraliterary reality, parody relies on an intertextual gesture. For Sklodowska (1991), "If art presupposes an adequate imitation of an action or of nature, parody can't be considered art, given that it imitates another artifact—that is, words instead of things—and, besides, subverts the very essence of mimesis through its mocking tonality" (2)<sup>12</sup>. For Linda Hutcheon, parody does not necessarily imply ridicule or scorn. In fact, she defines it as "repetition with difference. A critical difference is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony" (Hutcheon, 32). An overarching irony is thus established: as an intertextual gesture, a parody of the *testimonio* form uses precisely the rhetorical and narrative devices intended to uphold an extraliterary reality. Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody* provides a convenient diachronic and synchronic development of the concept, and challenges conventionally

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<sup>12</sup> "Si el arte presupone una imitación adecuada de una acción o de la naturaleza, la parodia no puede considerarse como arte, puesto que imita otro artefacto -o sea, palabras en vez de cosas- y, además, a través de su tonalidad burlesca subvierte la propia esencia de la mimesis"



accepted notions such as parody's comic nature or its alleged relationship to reality (20), particularly in light of Margaret A. Rose's seminal *Parody / Metafiction*. Sklodowska, Hutcheon, and Rose all lay the theoretical groundwork necessary for analyzing how Castellanos Moya's *El Asco* parodies *testimonio*, whereby *testimonio*'s formal conventions are decontextualized in a fictional realm. *El Asco* toys with notions of veracity through an irreverent account transcribed by a writer –the character “Moya”– while issues of sympathy and representativity are turned on their head by a speaker who relinquishes any relation to his community of origin, and instead attacks it by employing an ethnographic discourse of eugenicist connotations.

As an art historian, Vega thinks himself clearly superior to the empty-minded inhabitants of his former nation, who live in a place where “everyone would like to be part of the military in order to be able to kill, that means being Salvadorean, Moya, wanting to seem like part of the military” (22)<sup>13</sup>, while referring in particular to its capital, a city “populated by stupid people that only want to seem like the stupid people who inhabit Los Angeles, a city which proves the congenital hypocrisy of this race” (46)<sup>14</sup>. An essentialist discourse which disparages all that is characteristically Salvadorean –from *pupusas* to *cerveza Pilsener*– alternates with a narrative that condemns the Salvadorians' lack of proper identity. Vega is, after all, an expert on the matter, legitimized in his assessment by the profession and position he occupies:

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<sup>13</sup> “todos quisieran ser militares para poder matar, eso significa ser salvadoreño, Moya, querer parecer militar”

<sup>14</sup> “poblada por gente estúpida que sólo quiere parecerse a los estúpidos que pueblan Los Angeles, una ciudad que te demuestra la hipocrecía congénita de esta raza”

“listen to me well,” he asks of Moya, “and take into account that my specialty consists in studying cultures” (84).<sup>15</sup>

Influenced by Thomas Bernhard’s diatribes against Austria and the Austrian people (in fact, the reader learns that Thomas Bernhard is the new name adopted by Edgardo Vega in Canada), the novel pushes forward with dizzying speed and an utter lack of sympathy for the victims of the war, for political projects of any kind, or for political correctness in general. The process of transcription is constantly stressed through the repetition of “Vega said to me”, a kind of ritualistic utterance which accompanies Moya’s entire account and reminds the reader of the vicarious nature of the narrative. That Moya is questioned by Vega for the sensationalist writing in his fiction (80), or that he drinks whiskey after whisky—courtesy of Vega—only serves to emphasize the problematic implications in the mediatory process at hand.

Using scarce punctuation and scathing language, *El asco* reveals that the protagonist did not leave the country in exile, as did so many of the Latin Americans he complains about. As he explains, “I didn’t leave in exile, nor seeking better economic conditions, I left because I never accepted the macabre joke of destiny which had me born in this land” (17)<sup>16</sup>. His return is motivated only by the necessary paperwork to receive the inheritance left by his recently deceased mother. As soon as he has dealt with the respective documents, he plans on boarding a plane that will take him to the comforts of the first world and leave behind the lowly, uncultured hordes of El Salvador. Distance, therefore, characterizes Vega’s project in El Salvador. Where

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<sup>15</sup> “oíme bien, y considerará que mi especialidad consiste en estudiar las culturas”

<sup>16</sup> “no me fui como exiliado, ni buscando mejores condiciones económicas, me fui porque nunca acepté la broma macabra del destino que me hizo nacer en estas tierras”

traditional testimonial narratives seek an identification of subject and collective bodies, Vega strives, through the systematic disparagement of all cultural objects, to disentangle himself from the Central American community. As an academic trained in the study of cultures, he accentuates this distance by transforming the collective subject into an object of inquiry. Despite his attempts to circumscribe the Salvadorean people in a reductive identitarian framework, however, his discourse is recurrently undercut by the impossibility of affording them a stable identity. Notwithstanding references to their immutable nature, Salvadoreans become characterized not by a particular set of follies but rather by their aspirations (to wish only to be members of the military, or similar to people in Los Angeles, or to start their own businesses), and by a hypocritical malleability endemic to their race, as Vega's racist rant would have it. This country, after all, "is a hallucination, Moya" (20)<sup>17</sup>, "a country where there aren't any artists but rather simulators" (77)<sup>18</sup>. Paradoxically, Vega's essentialist discourse is subverted by the very terms which attempt to fix it through categorical assessments. This failed strategy is particularly relevant as Vega himself oscillates between contending identitarian claims. As the introductory section reveals, he is neither Edgardo Vega nor Thomas Bernhard, and despite officially being a Canadian citizen, his desire to distance himself from the Salvadorean community is continuously undermined. This failed desire is symbolically exemplified by the loss of his Canadian passport, which creates an unbearable anxiety for the protagonist and provides the main narrative tension throughout the last third of the novel. In his attempt to endow Salvadoreans with a stable, fixed identity, Vega is in fact accounting for a loss on his

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<sup>17</sup> "es una halucinación, Moya"

<sup>18</sup> "un país donde no hay artistas sino simuladores"

own part or, as Joanna Bartow has put it, attempting to “find an essential truth that could compensate a lack they perceive in themselves” (79).

The novel’s narrative structure can pass unnoticed at first. After all, Vega’s endless rant seems to deafen every other detail reaching the reader. The real subject of enunciation, however, remains partially concealed. In fact, Vega speaks out to an interlocutor, a writer referred to as Moya who listens over whiskey in a local bar as his friend blows off steam. Moya transcribes Vega’s monologue. His presence in the text, despite being almost imperceptible, conditions the authority of the text and compromises the fidelity of the account a priori. Readers are reminded of Moya’s constant presence through the words “Vega said to me”, a performative utterance which is repeated throughout the novel. The utterance resuscitates the figure of Moya again and again, invoking its presence and reminding the reader that the authority of the text lies, in the end, with the writer himself. Simultaneously, this utterance emphasizes the oral quality of the story, therefore certifying the immediacy of the account and legitimizing it as it comes from the source.

In this manner, *El asco* displays the problematic issues associated with the veracity and transparency to which *testimonio* aspires. Said ambiguity is enforced through a performative utterance which names and therefore reproduces the presence of the mediator. However, Moya’s position of privilege as creator and editor of Vega’s account is undermined by the latter’s references to his poor writing skills, such that “no matter how much sex and violence you include in them, there will be no way

those skimpy stories will transcend” (80)<sup>19</sup>. The accuracy of the text is called into question, as the transcriber’s own authorial interests affect the purported fidelity of an account which might, as Vega implies, be subjected to the sensationalist bent of Moya’s writing. The transcriber cannot be conceived of as a transparent mediatory presence, in much the same way that the narrative subject’s self-undermining account fails to offer a univocal version of the narrated events.

*El asco* begins with a “Warning” which remits to the narrative pacts which bracketed traditional testimonial texts. “Edgardo Vega”, the reader learns, “the main character in this story, exists: he lives in Montreal under a different name –a Saxon name which isn’t Thomas Bernhard either. He shared his opinions with me, surely with more emphasis and bluntness than that contained in this text. I wished to soften the points of view which would have scandalized certain readers”<sup>20</sup>. The warning fulfills two functions which embody one of *testimonio*’s central contradictions. On one hand, it attests to the existence of Edgardo Vega and lays claim to the presence of his voice. Said presence guarantees, as in traditional testimonial texts, the legitimacy of the text, and grants an authority based on access to the source of the account. On the other hand, the warning highlights Moya’s indiscriminate mediation in the construction of the text. His task is not solely that of a transcriber. As a writer of “skimpy stories that go by utterly unnoticed,” (79)<sup>21</sup> he has the power to censor the

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<sup>19</sup> “por más sexo y violencia que les metás, no habrá manera de que esos cuentitos famélicos trasciendan”

<sup>20</sup> “el personaje central de este relato, existe: reside en Montreal bajo un nombre distinto –un nombre sajón que tampoco es Thomas Bernhard. Me comunicó sus opiniones seguramente con mayor énfasis y descarnado del que contienen en este texto. Quise suavizar aquellos puntos de vista que hubieran escandalizado a ciertos lectores.”

<sup>21</sup> “cuentitos famélicos que pasan absolutamente desapercibidos.”

text, to adapt the account, to administer an economy of pathos at will in order to protect, according to his own words, readers' sensitivities. The warning, in turn, addresses the conflict between the realist and the modernist paradigms *testimonio* has to deal with, as Santiago Colás has pointed out in "What's Wrong With Representation?"—a conflict which brackets the central tensions found in the elaboration of *testimonio* criticism.

According to Colás, the realist paradigm assumes the possibility of transparency in representation, in a manner analogous to the Aristotelian notion of mimesis. The modernist conception, on the other hand, reveals the unbridgeable gap that exists between the representation and that which is represented. In this manner, every modernist "representation ultimately refers to itself in that it speaks of its own inability to efface itself by closing the gap between itself and that 'other,' which it is supposed to make present, to represent" (Colás 162). *Testimonio* as a realist representation—in Miguel Barnet's conception, for instance—breaks the barrier between the collective identity and that of the individual. On this, Yúdice would argue that *testimonio* is above all an act, and that as such the notion of a preexisting collective identity fails to take into account *testimonio*'s own performative role in its constitution. In the modernist paradigm, on the other hand, the text draws attention to itself. In doing so it underscores the impossibility of transcending its own mediatory presence, particularly when seeking to achieve the identity between the individual and the collective. Colás, as the title of his essay indicates, opts for a postmodern paradigm of representation that attempts to avoid both realist and modernist pitfalls, asserting that "it is essential that representation (in Laclau's 'translucent' or 'impure'

postmodern sense, and not in the realist ‘transparent’ or modernist ‘self-reflexive’ sense) be operative for the *testimonio* as practice to fulfill itself” (170). In other words, as representation and act, *testimonio* would come to reveal the contradictions that inhabit it, thus subverting the allegedly “pure, truthful, native history that make it so powerful” (170).

Following Yúdice’s interpretation of *testimonio*’s purported project, along with Colas’ postmodernist conception of the form’s programmatic horizon, *El asco* can also be read as an act. However, unlike testimonial texts that constructed a community of resistance –a sort of popular consciousness– *El asco* functions as an act of disavowal. In this manner, *El asco* reverses the maneuver enacted by *testimonio*, whereby the narrative subject’s account is implied to speak for the community. In this novel, the narrative subject uses the collective body’s reprehensible characteristics in order to fashion himself in opposition to it. As Beatriz Cortez argues, “Vega is still a victim of his rigid concept of Salvadorean identity, since he makes an effort to define his interests and his artistic and cultural taste based on the difference between himself and that stereotypical identity of what is Salvadorean” (Cortez 252)<sup>22</sup>. Vega’s petrified version of the El Salvadorean people is therefore not simply a derogatory rant, but rather the very condition which enables him to strive for a desired identity.

The novel’s performative “Vega said to me” pits the subject of enunciation against the community he comes from. It is an “essentialized version” of the collective, in Joanna Bartow’s terms (79), but it also suggests a longing on Vega’s part

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<sup>22</sup> “Vega sigue siendo víctima de su rígido concepto de la identidad salvadoreña, pues hace un esfuerzo por definir sus intereses y sus gustos artísticos y culturales con base en su diferencia ante esa identidad estereotípica de lo salvadoreño”

to find footing in the unstable ground upon which his identity rests. As explained in the initial “Warning”, the protagonist is neither Vega nor Bernhard, but rather someone who has a “different name”. As a cipher of difference, Vega unleashes a rant which ultimately reflects back on his own incapacity to establish himself as a Canadian. His systematic condemnation of the Salvadorean community logically culminates in a denunciation of any political project, especially since such a project would envision a horizon of change. That Moya might want to “establish a newspaper of a new kind” seems to him “truly disingenuous, a stupidity characteristic of hot-headed people like the ones who refuse to see reality” (63)<sup>23</sup>. Reality, according to Vega’s implicit desires and explicit discourse, does not allow for change.

The narrative and rhetorical devices of *testimonio* are alive and well in two of Rodrigo Rey Rosa’s seminal fictional texts. “Ningún lugar sagrado” (1998) and *Que me maten si...* (1997) both incorporate thematic concerns and formal features of the much maligned testimonial form. If in *The Real Thing* John Beverley addressed the need to “confront the circumstance that the moment of *testimonio* is over (...) if only by the logic of aesthetic familiarization” (77), it is perhaps time to recover precisely those aesthetic features, given the extent of their impact on Central American contemporary fiction.

“Ningún lugar sagrado” is a good place to begin addressing some of the problematic conventions of *testimonio*. The story speaks to the limits of the relationship between transcriber and testimonial speaker, and to the lacunae constitutive of narratives resulting from such exchanges. Issues of trust, veracity, and

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<sup>23</sup> “fundar un periódico de nuevo tipo” / “una verdadera ingenuidad, una estupidez de cerebros calenturientos como el que se niega a ver la realidad”



desire are raised through a conversation between an American therapist and her Guatemalan patient. *Que me maten si...*, on the other hand, does not replicate the formal structure of *testimonio*, but instead addresses the complex function of silence in testimonial narratives. Additionally, the novel will serve to connect the referential assumptions of *testimonio* with the cinematographic medium, given that both complicate the issue of representation by remitting to an extraliterary reality. According to Alberto Moreiras, “testimonio is testimonio because it suspends the literary at the very same time that it constitutes itself as a literary act: as literature, it is a liminal event opening unto a nonrepresentational, drastically indexical order of experience” (195).

It is no coincidence that “Ningún lugar sagrado” gives its title to the collection of short stories written by Rodrigo Rey Rosa between 1997 and 1998. After all, the story enacts a prevalent tension found in the other texts of the anthology, particularly given that most of them deal with characters that find themselves in contexts and spaces which are progressively defamiliarized. The possibility of belonging, these stories seem to say, is merely an illusion which arises out of fleeting circumstances.

“Ningún lugar sagrado” presents the dismantling of a professional relationship between a Guatemalan patient and his American therapist. The story is set in New York, but alternates between the confessional space of the therapist’s office and the occasional telephone conversations they share. A contract of sincerity is agreed upon from the start, yet the relationship is configured by an additional set of conditions that determine and complicate the exchanges that ensue. First and foremost, the patient’s mother tongue is not English, creating a linguistic barrier concealed beneath what

appears to be a seamless communication between both characters. Additionally, the protagonist's condition as a scriptwriter introduces an element of instability into his alleged non-fictional account. In this sense, his Guatemalan background risks conflating the predicaments of his home country with his personal dilemmas, particularly when violence from the recent civil war catches up with him in the safe and sacred space of New York. These issues are further obscured by his wish to recover a lost expressive drive –the alleged reason behind his visits to the therapist–, an endeavor which is soon replaced by other, more carnal desires.

“Ningún lugar sagrado” is not about an individual who is moved to narrate by a situation of extreme urgency, as Yúdice's definition of *testimonio* would have it (“Testimonio and postmodernism” 44), but rather about a speaker who invokes and produces that very situation of urgency through the act of narration. For Yúdice, the speaker of *testimonio* “does not speak for or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation that is simultaneously personal and collective” (42). That is, as an *act*, *testimonio* is assumed to avoid the stumbling blocks of representation, even if representation itself, as Santiago Colás argues in “What's Wrong with Representation?”, does not foreclose the possibility of a testimonial counter-hegemonic narrative (170). Of course, the narrator in “Ningún Lugar Sagrado” is not a subaltern figure representing a marginal community; rather, he is a scriptwriter who has represented such marginal reality through fictional and documentary films.

As this character seeks to recover his creative voice, he embarks on an oral account that includes traumatic details from his intimate history as well as from his

country's recent past. His sister, engaged in human rights work in Guatemala, is suddenly forced to flee to New York in order to escape certain death, bringing with her the world of hired assassins, paranoia, and violence the narrator thought he had left behind. Language is suddenly revealed to be unreservedly performative, as that which invokes reality and produces it through the very act of narration. Such narration, however, is guided by an invisible presence. The therapist functions as silent counterpart to her patient's account: she offers comments and questions that can only be inferred from the text, but which shape the narrative nonetheless. That is, she occupies diverse roles that reflect the problematic positions assumed by mediating figures in traditional testimonial texts.

Geopolitical power dynamics certainly configure the relationship between the American therapist and the narrator from the start, even if the therapist's office and the quintessential couch provide a warm, welcoming space. "I should get on the couch, right," the narrator asks in one of their later conversations, subsequently adding, "I love this corner of your office" (81)<sup>24</sup>. However, when initially asked about international politics, the protagonist spurts out a somewhat aggressive response that suggests problematic implications for their professional relationship: "Don't be offended, but I think Americans have disgusting foreign policy. They, you, have financed, planned, supervised, the notorious killings of the indigenous, of students, of leftists in the last thirty years" (71)<sup>25</sup>. The narrator's family history is inextricably linked to the repressive policies of the Guatemalan state, most recently with his sister

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<sup>24</sup> "Me pongo en el diván, verdad" / "Este rincón de su despacho me encanta"

<sup>25</sup> "No se vaya a ofender, pero creo que los norteamericanos tienen una asquerosa política exterior. Ellos, ustedes, han financiado, planeado, supervisado, las famosas matanzas de indios, de estudiantes, de izquierdistas en los últimos treinta años"

being threatened for her attempt to expose such crimes. The assassination of a religious figure involved in human rights work is in fact what sparks the departure of the narrator's sister from Guatemala. The reference alludes to the murder in 1998 of Monseñor Gerardi –the person in charge of the publication of REMHI (Reporte para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica). The assassination, powerfully documented by Francisco Goldman in *The Art of Political Murder*, fostered a media-charged though initially legally sterile reaction from human rights groups. The narrator of “Ningún lugar sagrado” goes on to question the role of FBI agents sent to the scene shortly after the murder, stating that some believed them to be responsible for effectively erasing the killers' fingerprints. Such suspicions of American involvement are displaced unto the therapist herself when, after feeling persecuted, the narrator says plainly, “I even doubted you. That you could be a collaborator” (79)<sup>26</sup>.

If the sister's situation reflects lingering sinister structures of postwar power, the narrator's uncle remits to the kinds of crimes which occurred at the time of the conflict. In fact, the story includes a description of a much questioned passage in Rigoberta Menchu's *testimonio*, in which she describes her father's death at the hand of the military when, in January 1980, the Army burned down the Spanish embassy, killing the indigenous protestors and embassy staff inside. The narrator's relation of these events mirrors Menchu's version, by describing how “Some farmers from Quiché had taken the Spanish embassy as a way to protest the fact that the army had

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<sup>26</sup> “Hasta de usted dudé. Que podía ser una confidente”

carried out a series of killings. My uncle was there, unluckily, at the embassy. The army didn't negotiate. They barged in and killed everyone inside" (75)<sup>27</sup>.

Issues arising from the problematic mediation between the narrator and the therapist should first be discussed with regard to the story's reliance on the second person point of view. This is the formal crystallization of the ambiguous agency exerted by the narrator in his account. In particular, the use of the second person throughout the story provides the illusion of the narrator's monopoly on speech, even as the therapist determines the course of the account through tacit interventions. Therefore, while the narrative resembles a stream of consciousness devoid of any restraints, the protagonist's speech is utterly dependent upon the feedback of a textually invisible counterpart, not unlike the role of the transcriber in traditional *testimonio*.

The relationship between the therapist and her patient is not merely that of a well-intentioned professional and her benevolent subject. In addition to the monetary exchange agreed upon in their first conversation, the professional rapport transitions, throughout the story, into an intimate, amorous affair. Both characters therefore displace the original terms of their contract, engaging in a single-voiced dialogue in which other, less explicit interests soon surface. The narrator recurrently associates the therapist with past lovers, recalling, for instance, a sexual encounter with an older woman that left him "in love with her, of course, utterly in love. You know, doctor?"

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<sup>27</sup> "Unos campesinos del Quiché habían tomado la embajada española como protesta contra el ejército por una serie de matanzas. Mi tío estaba ese día, por mala suerte, en la Embajada. El ejército no pactó. Entraron por la fuerza y mataron a todos los que estaban allí"

Your voice reminds me of hers” (72)<sup>28</sup>. The therapist herself, as will be discussed later, seems to locate her desire in the *otherness* of the narrator, through essentialist gestures that are consistently encouraged by the cinematographer himself. Although she does not speak, the therapist’s desires are progressively voiced through the narrator’s own account. The final erotic scene thus enacts one of *testimonio*’s principal conflicts, since “*testimonio*’s political location makes suspect any suggestion of the transcriber’s ventriloquism through the subject. The transcriber’s relinquishment constitutes the ideal that in reality is critiqued and undermined by the very texts produced by the discursive gesture of ceding authority” (Bartow, 34). The therapist’s textual invisibility therefore mystifies a series of hidden interests and desires which nonetheless permeate the narrator’s account.

In their first exchange, the narrator agrees to his therapist’s request for the establishment of a contract of sincerity: “A verbal contract? Tell me. Sincerity? Of course, doctor” (68)<sup>29</sup>. If one is to take Beverley’s opposition between sincerity and literariness as determinant for the identification of *testimonio* (“Margin at the Center”, 33), the fact that sincerity is to be expected from a scriptwriter points to the difficulty of establishing such attribute in any textual medium –that is, any medium in which rhetorical operations come to suspend the possibility of conveying a univocal message.

Whereas sincerity could be claimed at the level of intentionality, the extent to which language functions as a transparent medium of expression is challenged from the start. The narrator wonders “if language won’t be a barrier. According to doctor

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<sup>28</sup> “enamorado de ella, desde luego, locamente. ¿Sabe, doctora?, su voz recuerda la de ella”

<sup>29</sup> “¿Un contrato verbal? Diga. ¿Sinceridad? Por supuesto, doctora”

Rosenthal it's not a problem. Besides my accent. I grow sick of hearing myself speaking in English. If you think so, great. Thank you, you're very kind, doctor" (68)<sup>30</sup>. Linguistic obstacles appear to be nonexistent, yet the speaker provides an account in a language not his own. The specters of this linguistic disjuncture, however, are conjured with every idiomatic expression that appears in the text: when the narrator teasingly tells the therapist that the affair with his neighbor can be explained by the fact that "The neighbor grows fond of the neighbor," or that "the cousin comes close to the cousin" (70)<sup>31</sup>, the reader is abruptly made aware that the text has internalized certain inconsistencies resulting from the negotiation taking place between different languages. Consequently, expressions which would otherwise be lost in translation are normalized for the sake of an apparently seamless communication. Once again, the transcriber-therapist hides below the text's surface. These invisible breaks and discontinuities, which certainly have a stake in the power dynamics at play in the characters' relationship, are concealed from the reader.

In one of the dreams described to his therapist, the protagonist finds himself naked and exposed in front of an audience. As he recalls it:

I was on the couch, which was sometimes a real-sized bed and sometimes became a bank/stool. Pleasure and money, I hadn't thought about it! You, although it wasn't really you, congratulated me. I didn't know why. You explained then that the party was being held to celebrate that a famous producer was going to make a film using our script. There was a journalist who insisted on seeing the manuscript. Couldn't I show it to him? The manuscript!,

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<sup>30</sup> "si el idioma no será una barrera. Según la doctora Rosenthal no es un problema. Aparte de mi acento. Yo me hartó de oírme a mí mismo hablando en inglés. Si a usted le parece, magnífico. Gracias, muy amable, doctora"

<sup>31</sup> "El vecino con la vecina se hacina" or that "¿Y la prima al primo se arrima?" *Note: the fact that this translation is such an infelicitous one proves the existence of inherent contradictions in the text which are hidden from the reader's view.*

I exclaimed. I became anguished as a student would, you know, like in those dreams of final exams. And suddenly I say: Yes, I have it here, doctor. And I open my coat, a black Macintosh. I'm naked, underneath the coat, but my skin is completely covered with words written in red ink. (86-87)<sup>32</sup>

The script referred to in the dream sequence alludes to a previous conversation held between the narrator and his sister (a conversation later described to the therapist), related to the need and ability of the scriptwriter to use his writing as a medium for effecting change, given the dire circumstances of the Guatemalan context: "Sure, she said, you could do something. I told her writing a script about it all would be useless. You won't know until you try, she answered" (85)<sup>33</sup>. The potential of film as a medium for resisting or denouncing a violent state of affairs is questioned by the narrator, and yet, it is precisely such a project that appears in the dream as a source of success for both patient and therapist. Of course, in the previous excerpt there is a strong connotation of prostitution tied to a questionable politics of representation. The narrator's body is textualized, hinting at the link between text and desire and its effect on the relationship between speaker and transcriber: when the story ends in a sexual act between the patient and his therapist, it becomes clear that the patient's renewed capacity for expression has been acquired in exchange for a fetishized version of himself, strategically created through his own account.

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<sup>32</sup> "Yo estaba en el divan, que a ratos era una cama tamaño real y a ratos se convertía en un banco. Placer y dinero, ¡no lo había pensado! Usted, aunque no era usted, me felicitaba. Yo no sabía por qué. Me explicó entonces que la fiesta era para celebrar que una famosa productora estaba realizando nuestro guión. Había un periodista que insistía en ver el manuscrito. ¿No se lo podía enseñar? ¡El manuscrito!, exclamé yo. Me entró una angustia de estudiante, sabe, como en esos sueños de exámenes finales. Y de pronto digo: Sí, aquí lo tengo, doctora. Y me abro la gabardina, una Macintosh negra. Estoy desnudo, debajo de la gabardina, pero mi piel está toda cubierta de palabras escritas en tinta roja"

<sup>33</sup> "Claro, me dijo, usted podría hacer algo. Le dije que escribir un guión acerca de todo aquello sería inútil. No lo sabrá hasta no intentarlo, replicó"



The sexual scene at the end of the story alludes to the impossibility of a purely selfless, horizontal relationship between the American therapist and her patient: “Yes, you undress me. Mmm. What a delicious tongue. Yes, anywhere. No, no sacred place” (92)<sup>34</sup>. New York is certainly not the sacred space originally envisioned by the narrator, and neither is the therapist’s couch. Yet the body itself incarnates this dynamic: the therapist can have access to every inch that she craves, and in fact there are no boundaries to the fulfillment of her fantasies. She has full admittance, both to the narrator’s body as well as to his text: after all, as shown in the quoted dream sequence, body and text are inextricably linked to desire. Of course, this is not a unidirectional movement: the narrator also takes advantage of his position, strategically enforcing his words and silences in order to enthrall the psychiatrist and move the conversation beyond the couch and into the bed. Notions of solidarity are challenged throughout the text, as the narrator’s account seems to lead to a mutually parasitic exchange. Joanna Bartow asserts that “Mutual legitimation encourages association at times to the point of identification with the other, but this identification becomes particularly complicated in the mediated *testimonio* by the multiple roles the participants assume and the effort inherent in this discourse of the privileged abdicating authority” (33-34). Such abdication is never complete, and the therapist’s textual invisibility simply highlights the degree to which the patient’s text is a construction of both parties.

The story ends with the narrator’s recovery of his expressive drive, leading up to a case of “graforragia” (90). When the therapist goes back to her apartment, where

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<sup>34</sup> “Sí, desvísteme tú. Umm. Qué lengua más rica. Sí, por donde quieras. No, ningún lugar sagrado.”

her patient has now gone into hiding, she finds out he has written “Twenty pages, it’s not little, no. I’m afraid not, doctor, it’s in Spanish. I always write in Spanish. It’s a monologue. (...) It takes place in New York. If one day someone translates it, of course. But don’t hold your breath, doctor” (90)<sup>35</sup>. The text the scriptwriter has produced seems to mimic the text the reader of “Ningún Lugar Sagrado” has at hand, creating a *mise en abîme*, by which both the story and the narrator’s newly written pages reflect one other, further challenging the notion of a narrative voice that holds true authorship over the text. In other words, although the therapist has conditioned the narrative, her tacit interventions are perhaps simply the product of the scriptwriter’s rhetorical maneuvers.

A passage in “Ningún lugar sagrado” presents an intertextual window into *Que me maten sí...* –a short novel published in 1997, only months after the Peace Accords were signed in Guatemala. Halfway through “Ningún lugar sagrado”, the cinematographer describes to his psychologist a violent scene in one of the movies he has made. The scene, which was criticized for its gore, depicts the assassination of the main character:

She is murdered by an former soldier and a mercenary. They’re going to throw the body into a river. To keep the body from floating to the surface after a couple of days, they have to open its belly and extract its insides. They fill up the belly with diving weights. That, more or less, is the normal practice in those cases. I wanted to show that in all its ugliness. Maybe it wasn’t necessary to show it in the forefront, but the assassins reflect that that kind of dirty work, which before the signing of the peace accords they would entrust their subalterns with, is now a task they must accomplish on their own and could be

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<sup>35</sup> “Veinte folios, no es poco, no. Me temo que no, doctora, está en español. Siempre escribo en español. Es un monólogo. (...) Ocurre en Nueva York. Si algún día alguien lo traduce, desde luego. Pero espere sentada, doctora.”

reason enough to change their lifestyle, more than beliefs or ideologies would.  
(80)<sup>36</sup>

In *Que me maten si...*, that same scene is depicted at the end of the novel, narrated almost exactly as described in “Ningún lugar sagrado”. The text is presented as an adequate receptacle for the cinematographic narrative, even when the novel itself continuously avoids the graphic portrayal of violence. In fact, the novel’s structure is based on the presence of gaps and silences, particularly when dealing with moments of bloodshed and brutality. After all, the novel reproduces an incomplete, if well-intentioned, version of Guatemala, the version that belongs to Lucien Leigh, a British journalist and one of the protagonists. Emilia, one of the three main characters in *Que me maten si...*, “had thought several times that the way in which he [Lucien] saw the world was bookish, and Nina shared her opinion. But see me here –she thought– lost in between the pages of a book that could have been written by him” (97)<sup>37</sup>. The cinematographic image thus comes to stand in for a text which fails to fully represent a local reality of violence.

In “Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression”, Tom Gunning contends that “Film’s indexical nature has almost always (and usually exclusively) been derived from its photographic aspects” (255), in reference to Pierce’s definition

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<sup>36</sup> La asesinan un ex militar y un especialista, un mercenario. Van a echar el cuerpo al fondo de un río. Para evitar que flote a los pocos días, tienen que abrirle la barriga y extraerle las vísceras. Le rellenan el vientre con pesos de buceo. Es, más o menos, la práctica normal en esos casos. Yo quería mostrar eso en toda su fealdad. Tal vez no era necesario mostrarlo en primer plano, pero los asesinos hacen la reflexión de que esta clase de trabajo sucio que, antes de la firma de la paz, solían confiar a subalternos y que ahora tenían que hacer ellos mismos, podría ser motivo para cambiar de modo de vida, más que los credos o las ideologías.

<sup>37</sup> “había opinado varias veces que la manera en que él [Lucien] veía el mundo era libresca, y Nina compartía su opinion. Pero heme aquí –pensó– perdida entre las páginas de un libro que podía haber sido escrito por él”

of “the index as a sign that functions through an actual existential connection to its referent” (255). In a narrative where the voice and pain of the subaltern subject are silenced in spite of the solidarity of foreign sympathizers, film appears to be the only medium capable of remitting to the extraliterary referent at hand—a referent which, according to Alberto Moreiras, is conjured up by *testimonio* itself (195). The final scene of the novel therefore serves as a counterpoint to the referential lacunae which permeate the text from beginning to end.

It is telling that Rey Rosa enrolled in an undergraduate film program before embarking on a literary career (“Placing” 164). Incidentally, it was film that led him to fiction: shortly after arriving in New York in 1979, Rey Rosa walked into the School of Visual Arts, where he came across a poster advertising a summer fiction workshop with Paul Bowles. With Bowles’ help, Rey Rosa began a full-fledged literary career that began in Tangiers, where he established a long-lasting relationship with the American writer and developed the iconic style that earned him high praise. According to Roberto Bolaño, “To say that Rodrigo Rey Rosa is the most rigorous writer of my generation and at the same time the most transparent, the one who best weaves his tales and the most luminous, is not to say anything new” (199)<sup>38</sup>.

*Que me maten si...* takes place shortly after the end of the civil war and traces the crossing paths of Emilia—a young Guatemalan student with a social conscience—, Ernesto—a former military officer consumed with guilt—, and Lucien Leigh—a foreign writer and reporter who lives as if immersed in an espionage novel. *Que me*

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<sup>38</sup> “Decir que Rodrigo Rey Rosa es el escritor más riguroso de mi generación y al mismo tiempo el más transparente, el que mejor teje sus historias y el más luminoso de todos, no es decir nada nuevo”

*maten si..* confirms Lucien’s intuition that “brutality in this country was an impersonal force that was manifested here or there, a force out of man’s control, relentless and uninterested” (9)<sup>39</sup>. By the end of the novel, all three characters have been killed, and their deaths reveal the perils resulting from naïve involvement in the changing power configurations of post-conflict Guatemala. The novel begins with Lucien resting at his home in Fernchurch, the small town in England where he lives, tinkering with his hearing aids. Throughout the novel, these aids serve their conventional purpose but also function as microphones used by the reporter to spy on the military. Lucien investigates criminal acts taken up by members of the army—drug trafficking and illegal adoptions among them—by dropping said hearing aids in suspect locations. As a journalist, however, Lucien also wishes to expose the abuses committed against the indigenous population during the years of state repression, and his hearing devices attempt to capture this reality. He travels to Guatemala, where he joins Emilia and an unsuspecting Ernesto on a trip to Chajul, a town where one of the massacres described in Rigoberta Menchu’s *testimonio* took place.

After walking around the area and asking Ernesto to speak to a local inhabitant, Lucien concludes, “So there are two different versions. He description [Menchú’s] is a bit exaggerated, a bit unbelievable. But his [the local informant’s] isn’t all that reliable either (...). Since he was there when it all happened, and didn’t do anything about it. He’d feel a bit guilty, and it’d be normal. Maybe cowardly”

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<sup>39</sup> “la brutalidad en ese país era una fuerza impersonal que se manifestaba aquí o allá, una fuerza fuera del control de los hombres, implacable y desinteresada”

(40)<sup>40</sup>. Lucien certainly questions the facticity of Menchú's *testimonio*, yet his faulty hearing and rudimentary espionage techniques imply a generalized misreading on his part. The account with which he challenges Menchú's facts has been obtained through a highly mediated process; after conducting an interview in Spanish with a local indigenous inhabitant whose native language is Ixil, Ernesto translates the corresponding account into English for Lucien's benefit (36-37). With Lucien, the subaltern certainly cannot speak. All three characters wade through a mire of false appearances and misguided intentions. Lucien's dilettante approach, however, signals most presently how the other is constructed through questionable practices of research and interpretation. In one of the few critical analysis of *Que me maten si...*, Nicasio Urbina states that the incomplete or distorted information gathered by the microphones show "that there's empty or blank spaces in these communications, similar to the ones we find in the novel's discourse. Once again we have communication's structure interrupted, fragmented, full of static, of noise"<sup>41</sup>. Lucien's failed hearing—in fact, his failed spying—is metonymically linked to the gaps found in the narrative as well as to the different, contending versions of the event described in Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio*. In this manner, the novel points to the limits of narrative, and also insinuates an ethical imperative, as these interpretative gaps illustrate the complex

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<sup>40</sup> "Así que hay dos versiones distintas. La descripción de ella [Menchú] es un poco exagerada, un poco increíble. Pero tampoco la de él [the local informant] es del todo confiable (...). Por haber estado allí cuando ocurrió todo esto, y no haber hecho nada al respecto. Se sentiría algo culpable, y sería natural. Tal vez cobarde"

<sup>41</sup> "que hay espacios vacíos o blancos en esas comunicaciones, similares a los que encontramos en el discurso de la novela. Una vez más entonces tenemos la estructura de la comunicación interrumpida, fragmentada, cargada de estática, de ruido".

politics of complicity and fraternity assigned to testimonial subject / transcriber configurations.

In this regard, Doris Sommer proposes that the academic or sympathetic transcriber should avoid notions of complicity or fraternity, given that “the projections of intimacy allow for an unproblematized appropriation that shortens the stretch between writer and reader, disregarding the text’s rhetorical decidedly literary performance of keeping us at a politically safe distance” (132). In this manner, she identifies the potential of *testimonio* in the moments when the text refuses to be interpreted, when the unfathomable abyss between reader and testimonial subject is revealed. For Sommer, the only way of approaching solidarity is by avoiding a hermeneutics of solidarity. Alberto Moreiras, however, has referred to that maneuver as “spectacular redemption,” the practice by which a discipline opens a critical self-reflection while simultaneously foreclosing the possibilities which said reflection might produce. Of course, Moreiras is here referring to a kind of potentially irresponsible reading on the part of a well-intentioned critic.

The title’s ellipsis also points to the silences that constitute the novel; the reasons for death and violence in Guatemala cannot be easily pinpointed, particularly when investigation is guided by poor assumptions. For Alexandra Ortiz Wallner, “This situation is simultaneously represented in the narration and a structure filled with voids, produced by the narrative movement of ellipsis, which points to the impossibility of knowing the totality of the story(ies) thanks to the omission of all

kinds of issues” (112-113)<sup>42</sup>. This is reflected by the fact that “Ernesto’s death, for example, Lucien’s shipwreck, and the murder of Emilia, occur in moments which are not represented in the narration, in the voids or blank spaces of the text” (Urbina)<sup>43</sup>. Even as Lucien espouses commendable ideals, his method suffers from evident pragmatic and ethical shortcomings. He has certainly “obtained a fair amount of interesting information this way. But it is impossible to publish it as newspaper articles because it’s not legal to do what he does to acquire it, and since the stories he usually obtains that way are generally not able to be proven, he uses them when he writes fiction” (44)<sup>44</sup>. Lucien’s solidarity with the marginalized people of Guatemala is obscured by literary aspirations dependent upon the reality he seeks to denounce. In this regard, *Que me maten si...* brings to light the kinds of tensions arising from an aesthetic valuation of *testimonio*. This implies more than a simple act of misreading, and rather points to an estheticization of solidarity.

The act of misreading is, however, of central importance to *Historia del traidor de nunca jamás* (1984). The novel received the “Premio Único del Certamen Latinoamericano”, organized by EDUCA (Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana), in 1985. In words of the jury, “The experimental manner in which the novel is conceived, tied to *testimonio* and the document, make it a valuable contribution to the

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<sup>42</sup> “Esta situación es simultáneamente representada en la narración y su estructura colmada de vacíos a través del movimiento narrativo de la elipsis, que señala la imposibilidad de conocer la totalidad de la(s) historia(s) debido a la omisión de los más diversos asuntos”.

<sup>43</sup> “la muerte de Ernesto, por ejemplo, el naufragio de Lucien y el asesinato de Emilia, ocurren en momentos no representados en la narración, en los vacíos o los blancos del texto”

<sup>44</sup> “conseguido bastante información interesante así. Pero le es imposible publicarla como artículos de prensa porque no es lícito hacer lo que hace para obtenerla, y como las historias que suele conseguir de esa manera no son comprobables por lo general, las usa cuando escribe ficción”



continent's contemporary narrative" (8)<sup>45</sup>. As the title points out, the novel deals with the act of betrayal, as the protagonist confesses to political crimes after being held in custody by police forces. However, this protagonist is not really a member of the FPL (Frente de Liberación Popular), the organization which the repressive state apparatus claims he belongs to. The police willingly misread his testimony in order to ascribe him functions and positions within the guerilla movement to legitimize his account and exaggerate the impact of his capture. In this way, "The idea of the book was that of a traitor who is not a traitor" (Menjívar Ochoa 2006)<sup>46</sup>. This is particularly relevant when taking into account the kinds of misreading the novel was subjected to. While Javier Saladriga, the protagonist, betrayed a cause to which he did not belong, the novel was said to uphold the testimonial impulse which its own rhetorical strategies disavowed. *Historia* thus became a work that functioned as *testimonio* despite its own best intentions.

Menjívar Ochoa himself was a member of the Frente de Liberación Popular, one of the guerrilla groups which would later band together to form the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, one of El Salvador's main political parties in the postwar period. *Historia del traidor del nunca jamás*, however, was not well received by the group's leadership, and Menjívar Ochoa's political supervisor confronted him following its publication. It is worth citing Menjívar Ochoa's words at length, as they reveal some of the main tensions resulting from the tenuous borders separating *testimonio* and novelistic discourse:

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<sup>45</sup> "La forma experimental en que está concebida la novela, unida al testimonio y al documento, la convierten en un valioso aporte a la narrativa actual del continente"

<sup>46</sup> "La idea del libro es la de un traidor que no es un traidor"

Afterwards there were people who came up with the idea that *El traidor* was part of my “contribution” to the El Salvadorean revolution, but well, it wasn’t. I’ve already explained here that my political supervisor [in the FLP] made a big deal about the whole thing, which culminated with my expulsion from the organization, because it was unthinkable that a member would even consider the possibility of writing about a traitor in the guerrilla, and even less so to write a novel. Additionally, a trend was already becoming stronger, one which considered that testimonio was the Verdadera Literatura de Nuestros Países, and that every novel had to be testimonial. *El traidor* was part of that discussion with fellow members: a novel could be written which wasn’t a testimonio, that in turn was experimental, etcetera, without existing within the parameters of “the struggle,” and which at the same time looked like testimonio. And I won the discussion: what better certificate than a dishonorable expulsion. I think that, as revenge, one of those fellow members invented a term for *El traidor*, and that’s how it’s been taught at the university: “testimonial realism.” So in other words I didn’t really win, or actually I didn’t win at all (Menjívar Ochoa, 2006)<sup>47</sup>.

Menjívar Ochoa embarked on a novelistic project “that at the same time looked like testimonio”, that is, a text which would share with *testimonio* certain conventions.

Important here is the fact that the novel should not function “within the parameters of the struggle”. In other words, despite mimicking *testimonio* and adopting its appearance, the novel would be devoid of the kind of ethos present in traditional testimonial texts. The choice of a traitor as the main character is telling in this regard, as Javier Saladriga never espoused a collective project and in fact offered information

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<sup>47</sup> Después hubo gente a la que se le ocurrió que *El traidor* era parte de mi "aporte" a la revolución salvadoreña, pero pues no. Ya conté por aquí que mi responsable política me armó todo un lío, que llegó a la expulsión de la organización, porque era inaudito que un militante considerara siquiera la posibilidad de escribir acerca de un traidor a la guerrilla, y menos aun que hiciera una novela. Por otra parte, ya tomaba fuerza una corriente que consideraba que el testimonio era la Verdadera Literatura de Nuestros Países, y que toda novela tenía que ser testimonial. *El traidor* fue parte de esta discusión con algunos compañeros: se podía armar una novela sin que fuera testimonio, que a su vez fuera experimental, etcétera, sin que entrara en los parámetros de "la lucha", y que a la vez pareciera un testimonio. Y pues gané la discusión; qué mejor certificado que una expulsión vergonzosa. Creo que, como venganza, uno de esos compañeros se inventó un término para *El traidor*, y así se ha enseñado en la universidad: "realismo testimonial". O sea que no me libré del todo, y más bien no me libré para nada.

which undermined the possibilities of the resistance which said project offered.

Menjívar Ochoa asserted that he wanted to “write a novel which wasn’t a testimonio” “and at the same time looked like testimonio”. In other words, he wanted to camouflage the text –one devoid of political objectives– within the armature of *testimonio*. As part of a discussion among his colleagues in the FPL, the novel itself became a kind of performance piece: one which would test the limits of *testimonio* or, more specifically, question the kinds of readings to which nontestimonial texts were subjected. It would thus seem that the novel itself operated in an analogous manner to that of Javier Saladrigas, the protagonist of *Historia*: while pretending to be part of “the struggle,” it actually questioned the extent to which an ethical commitment was understood to be implicit in an esthetic stance.

The novel’s introductory section replicates the conventions of the fairytale. Javier Saladrigas, the protagonist, is detained by secret police as he carries inflammatory material in a briefcase, including rebel propaganda. This event, which will have dire consequences for Javier, is coded through a language remitting to Little Red Riding Hood: “What big eyes you have, wolf. The ears are the biggest, silly: all the better to eat you with; I like you but you seem suspicious; maybe that’s why I like you. Show me what you have in your little brown briefcase, leather folder, little wicker basket with little things for the clandestine grandmother” (Menjívar Ochoa 10)<sup>48</sup>. To begin with, Menjívar Ochoa’s work establishes an intertextual dialogue with *Caperucita en la zona roja* (1977) by Manlio Argueta, a formally experimental

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<sup>48</sup> “Qué ojos más grandes tenés, lobo. Lo más grande son las orejas, bobito: sirven para comerte mejor; me caés bien pero me parecés sospechoso; tal vez por eso me caés bien. Enseñame qué traés en tu maletita café, cartapacio de cuero, cestita de mimbre con cositas para la abuela clandestina”

testimonial novel that deals, in part, with the internal struggles in the Salvadorean guerrilla. The usage of the fairytale genre at the outset of the novel also provides a kind of counterpoint to the mimetic impulse which underlies *testimonio*: it describes an arrest which will have a grim outcome for Javier, while simultaneously ciphering these deadly possibilities within a language more commonly associated with childhood innocence and moralistic undertones. Of course, *Little Red Riding Hood* was itself interpreted in multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways, given that Charles Perrault's original text was later adapted into alternative versions. This beginning in *Historia* signals an element of literariness which is present throughout the novel, quite distinct from the conceit of "overly transparent and comfortable reading" (Bartow 29) which characterized initial testimonial texts. Moreover, the title of the novel points to a kind of fantasy land where the events occur: this is the traitor of "nunca jamás" –of Never Never Land–, a space where, in diametrical opposition to *testimonio*, reality is radically suspended.

The narrated events, common to a period of state repression in Central America, are staged through the use of different formal techniques, including abrupt changes in point of view, the use of newspaper clippings, dramatic dialogue (at the moment of the interrogation), and stream of consciousness fragments. In the end, *Historia del traidor nunca jamás* harbors themes of artificiality and falsehood at its core, by presenting a testimony which is crafted and manipulated at will with exclusively strategic purposes, and articulated in the text in an experimental fashion.

Once imprisoned, Javier Saladrigas is taken to a room to be interrogated. The man in charge of the investigation, Gerardo Pineda, proceeds to intimidate and

terrorize him, stopping short of the physical torture to which other prisoners are subjected. Javier Saladrigas confesses to all kinds of crimes against the state, none of which are of his doing. The fact that his brother belongs to a certain guerilla organization allows him to supply names of militants and sympathizers, even if his relationship to revolutionary groups is distant at best. His testimony condemns many to torture and death, and said testimony is restaged and recorded in order to be played over and over on the news, reminding the public that Javier “joined the subversive forces more for economic interest than for idealism or revolutionary conviction” (25)<sup>49</sup>. Thus, Javier is endowed with a falsified position of authority which allows him to act as representative of the collective group opposed to the dictatorship. As a blank page, Javier is inscribed with the discourse employed by the state to legitimize its use of and monopoly on violence. In fact, his body becomes the locus of conflicting identities, as his former relationship with members of the guerrilla forces him to assume a new name and an invented past following his exile to Mexico.

However, the novel was not only misread by fellow members of the guerilla. In *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolution* (1990), John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman argue that in El Salvador “Poetry and *testimonio* continue to be important cultural forms: very close to the raw political edge of Dalton’s best poetry, for example, is (...) Rafael Menjívar Ochoa’s novel *Historia del traidor*” (Beverley and Zimmerman 141). Menjívar Ochoa came across Beverley and Zimmerman’s reading of his novel fifteen years after *Historia* had been published, and was quite surprised with what he found:

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<sup>49</sup> “ingresó a la subversión más que por idealismo o convicción revolucionaria, por interés económico”

And I say the book is irresponsible because there is not a single record of any of the Salvadorean writers mentioned there that corresponds with reality. Beverley and Zimmerman didn't even ask the authors they were speaking about, but rather leftists militants who barely had contact with literature! In 2000 I met Zimmerman and asked him how they'd come to publish "that," and he said that, well, the rush, they didn't have much time to investigate because the Sandinistas had just lost the elections in Nicaragua, and the book had to be published as it was so that it wouldn't just stay in the warehouses, what are we going to do about it, it had to be sold, the urgency. Although indeed, Marc was a really nice guy (Menjívar Ochoa, 2006)<sup>50</sup>.

For the critics, the testimonial value of the novel (characterized by a somewhat elusive "raw political edge") was enough to include it in the tradition of Roque Dalton, the quintessential Salvadorean poet and author of *Miguel Mármol* (1972), certainly one of *testimonio*'s foundational texts. Their investigation for the book—in fact their reading of the texts—, according to Menjívar Ochoa, was literally a political one, one which did not even include the authors' opinion on their own work. The issue here is not so much about the correct kind of reading; after all, Menjívar Ochoa seems to simply favor a textual interpretation based on authorial intent. Rather, it reveals how a novel containing some of *testimonio*'s main tropes—the context of civil war, the inner workings of the guerilla, the discussion of commitment to the cause—could be read in so many conflicting manners, particularly by individuals sympathetic to the

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<sup>50</sup> Y digo que el libro es irresponsable porque no hay una sola ficha de uno solo de los autores salvadoreños que se mencionan allí que se corresponda con la realidad. ¡Beverley y Zimmerman ni siquiera les preguntaron a los autores de los que hablaban, sino a militantes de izquierda que apenas tendrían contacto con la literatura! En 2000 conocí a Zimmerman y le pregunté cómo habían publicado "eso", y me dijo que, bueno, las prisas, no tuvieron mucho tiempo para investigar porque los sandinistas acababan de perder las elecciones en Nicaragua, y el libro había que sacarlo como estuviera o como se pudiera para que no se quedara en bodegas, qué le vamos a hacer, había que venderlo, la urgencia. Eso sí, un tipo simpatiquísimo, Marc.

revolutionary cause. The lack of *testimonio*'s rhetorical maneuvers, including the often problematic paratextual conventions, did not stop either critics or guerrilla members from assuming that the novel was the real thing.

In a sense, the novel revealed *testimonio*'s underbelly: this was, after all, the story of a traitor, the individual par excellence, he who speaks for himself and in direct opposition to the community. Yet Javier Saladrigas never claimed to be part of that community, just as the text itself never claimed to be a case of testimonial narrative. This is not to say, of course, that Saladrigas' collaboration is comparable to the disavowal constitutive of Menjívar Ochoa's text. However, like Saladrigas, the novel seemed to offer a confession to that which was not true or, to reverse Moreiras' description of *testimonio*, the novel suspends the real at the very same time it constitutes itself as a real act. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that Menjívar Ochoa's expulsion from the FRP also took place a few years after Roque Dalton's death. Significantly enough, Roque Dalton himself was executed by fellow members of the ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo) following allegations he had collaborated with the CIA.

Considering his self-aware usage of *testimonio*'s conventions, Menjívar Ochoa knew he was playing with fire. The stakes at the time of the novel's publication were high and, as his previously cited words show, the writing of a novel by a member of the guerrilla was destined to be considered suspect. Going back to the novel's title, it is telling that *Historia* includes the play on the words and ambivalence of story and history. *Historia del traidor de nunca jamás* was, in a way, a prophetic title: the story or the history of he who betrays a fictional world –in fact, not only fictional but rather

ahistorical, given the perennial nature of Never Never Land. Yet fiction, in turn, took revenge on Menjívar Ochoa, as fiction itself is indissociable from rhetoric, and rhetoric “radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration” (de Man 10). Precisely because of the literary status of the text, it became subject to different, and even contradictory, interpretations. In the end, reading into the referential possibilities of the text ultimately trumped the formally experimental impetus of its writing. Menjívar Ochoa left the armed forces in disgrace, and like Javier Saladrigas, ended up going into exile in Mexico City.

The literary and extraliterary modes in which this novel was produced and circulated unmasks the precarious constitution of *testimonio* as it was originally conceived. In the end, *testimonio*'s particular locus of enunciation –the sphere of influence it was said to have as both a political and rhetorical instrument– was determined by the position and corresponding authority of those who named it as such.

This chapter began with a critical elaboration of *testimonio* which sought to tease out its main conventions. If such exposition appropriated a religious language, this was due not only to *testimonio*'s etymological roots or to the religious connotation present in the very act of testimony. Rather, it pointed to a sacralization of the testimonial form during its heyday. At stake was the critics' desire to grant it a sacred space where *testimonio* could be immune to knotty issues of textual mediation, problematic politics of solidarity, and the quintessential questions of representation. The debates gathered in *The Real Thing*, as discussed in the works of Santiago Colás, George Yúdice, Sklodowska, Beverley and others, illustrate the complications which academics attempted to navigate in their efforts to afford *testimonio* the possibility of



resistance its purportedly marginal, counter-hegemonic locus of enunciation seemed to promise. A sympathetic academic sphere situated itself in an aporetic space, one where “We wanted to have it both ways: from within the system we dreamed about being outside with the ‘subaltern’; our words were to reflect the struggles of the oppressed. But you cannot be inside and outside at the same time. You cannot be nomadic and sedentary at the same time” (Gugelberger 2). The desire to access the alterity of the subaltern and lend voice to its message found itself at odds with the position of privilege of well-intentioned transcribers and intellectuals.

Moreiras puts it eloquently when stating that “As testimonio criticism grounds itself in the affirmation of the extraliterary dimension of the testimonial text, it unavoidably puts said extraliterary dimension at the service of a literary-critical performance that reabsorbs the extraliterary into the literary-representational system” (203). In other words, testimonial criticism is condemned to neutralize –or in the worst case, fetishize—*testimonio*’s irreducible extraliterary realm. This is, in part, what happens when Lucien Leigh’s well meaning but ultimately failed attempt to capture the *true accounts* of Central American violence end as fodder for his books, as fiction. This nonrepresentational realm becomes assimilated by that which Moreiras has referred to as a “poetics of solidarity” (233), the hermeneutical operations by which *testimonio* is reabsorbed into the canonical literary-critical apparatus, thus losing that which made it an act of resistance in the first place.

However, the texts analyzed in this chapter do not merely indicate that the project of *testimonio* has failed to live up to expectations. The form itself has been criticized from the left and from the right for a plethora of reasons, and falling back on

the generalized state of cynism described by Beatriz Cortez would simply put an artificial ending to a conversation which is far from over. The factual value of *testimonio* should not be disputed, and in fact *testimonio* has been at the forefront of legal processes in charge of bringing those guilty of human rights abuses to justice<sup>51</sup>. That the fictional texts analyzed here point out the tensions and limitations of traditional testimonial texts (particularly as conceived through *testimonio* criticism) in turn carries in itself a form of resistance, a necessary self-reflexivity: that of not succumbing to a naïve enactment of the poetics of solidarity. After all, as Avelar Idelber asserts, defeat is “*that moment of experience when all solidarity becomes a trope necessarily blind to the rhetorical structure that makes it possible*. Such blindness will only be exacerbated if literary criticism insists on substituting the eulogy of *testimonio* for reflection on its conditions of possibility in times of defeat” (Avelar 68). In the following chapters, *testimonio* will be read within its current literary configurations: in dialogue with detective fiction and the archive.

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<sup>51</sup> An emblematic case would be the legal process against former dictator Efraín Ríos Montt and other high-ranking officers, started in 1999 and led by Rigoberta Menchú.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE WITNESS IN DETECTIVE FICTION: FROM COMMITMENT TO COMPROMISE

Contemporary fictional production in Central America finds itself at the crossroads of *testimonio* and the detective novel. The works of Horacio Castellanos Moya, Rodrigo Rey Rosa, and Rafael Menjívar Ochoa are emblematic of this current state of literary affairs. Each of these authors plays with the rhetorical strategies present in the testimonial form –a set of tropes discussed in the previous chapter– while simultaneously employing the narrative conventions which characterize detective fiction. The texts analyzed in this chapter adopt and adapt these conventions in order to effectively dismantle the problematic assumptions of *testimonio*. They achieve this in a twofold manner. First, by toying with the relationship between witnesses offering their accounts and the communities they allegedly speak for. Secondly, by showing a morally complex, less pristine notion of the witness, and exploring into the processes that lend legitimacy and authority to their particular discursive practices.

The relationship between witness and the community to which said witness belongs is a central aspect of contemporary Central American detective fiction. The specter of *testimonio*'s politics of representation, so to speak, haunts these texts. No longer entrusted with collective voices, witnesses speak for themselves, even when their words have dire consequences for the collective bodies to which they pertain. In

fact, as these works show, witnesses frequently stand in direct opposition to their communities. They are individuals who find themselves in frail and sometimes desperate situations, often collaborating with characters of questionable motives in order to save their skins or secure monetary gain.

As Joanna Bartow asserts, “Testimonial elements in some fiction can closely simulate and even parody the transcriber-informant relationship or raise related issues through relationships of authority and legitimation even when the narrated situation does not reproduce an oral interview format like that of testimonial texts” (Bartow 101). Central American detective fiction draws a great deal of attention to the conditions which endow witness accounts with legitimacy. If *testimonio* was problematically blinded by a phonocentric conceit and the desire to grant center stage to the testimonial subject, contemporary detective fiction focus, instead, on the manner in which particular witness accounts are invested with an authority independent of their corresponding authorship. The issue of testimonial authority, as is well known, has often been challenged, paradigmatically in Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio*. As Elzbieta Sklodowksa asserts in “Author-(dys)function: Reading *I, Rigoberta Menchú*”, “we are bound to see that behind the title, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, which allocates testimonial authority to one voice, lurk numerous political and cross-cultural complications” (200). What thus occurs in these fictional texts is a kind of transposition: legitimacy is shifted from the particular loci of enunciation occupied by the witnesses, as traditional *testimonio* would have it, and displaced to the specific positions of authority of their addressees. In other words, the issues is not so much who is sharing the information but, rather, with whom that information is being

shared. Therefore, the power relation configuring these exchanges becomes of central importance.

Each of the detective narratives discussed in this chapter include, as one of their constitutive elements, the act of testimony. In Rafael Menjívar Ochoa's novels, testimonies are meaningless as forms of public condemnation, and only acquire value as legitimizing mechanisms for those in power. As evidenced in *Los años marchitos* (1990), the link between text and testimonial subject is severed, providing the testimony with a kind of performative autonomy while dismissing the particularities of its production. In *De vez en cuando la muerte* (2002), the third novel of the trilogy initiated by *Los años marchitos*, victims' accounts are valuable insofar as they can circulate as part of an economy of sensationalist news pieces. Consumption by the public at large is that which endows testimonies with any kind of value. Simultaneously, Menjívar Ochoa's characters find themselves in complex relationships with the communities to which they belong, opting for anonymity or ubiquity and undermining the possibility of collective representation.

Similarly, Horacio Castellanos Moya's detective fictions are characterized by protagonists espousing the cynical sensibility famously described by Beatriz Cortez in *Estética del cinismo*. As Laura, the narrator of *La diabla en el espejo* (2000) asserts, "It's awful, my dear, with Olga María's murder the same thing will happen that happens with all the crimes committed in this country: the authorities will never find out anything and people will simply forget about it" (190). *La diabla en el espejo* subverts the traditional relationship between testimonial subject and transcriber, effectively blurring the lines which separate one from the other. The second novel by

Castellanos Moya analyzed in this chapter, *El arma en el hombre* (2001), follows former special ops soldier Robocop as he attempts to adjust to and survive the postwar Central American context. Despite committing multiple crimes during and following the civil war, granting testimony grants him, in turn, a second opportunity, paradoxically affording him the life he took away from the witnesses of his own criminal activities. There is no possible solidarity in either of Castellanos Moya's novels, as the link between individual and community is radically severed. Testimony is granted solely in function of the receiving party's interests, which, in both cases, are characterized by suspect political positions.

Testimony is configured differently in the detective fiction novels of Rodrigo Rey Rosa. In *Piedras encantadas* (2001), the attempted murder of a young boy called Silvestre is addressed from a multiplicity of perspectives. Victim, a hired private investigator, and characters of questionable moral standing all offer contrasting accounts of the crime. These conflicting versions are collectively embodied by the city, a place which is characterized by a topography that seems to give rise to the moral turpitude of its inhabitants. The urban space itself prosopopeically becomes a witness, circumscribing and simultaneously eliciting a polyphonic testimonial narrative.

*Testimonio* and detective fiction share a central concern in that both deal with acts of crime and their aftermath. While their extra-literary objectives are certainly different, both textual forms involve the unveiling of events leading up to and following the predicaments of victims. Questions of testimonies' legitimacy, investigative methodology, and the limitations of established knowledge permeate the

works discussed in this chapter. As Beatriz Cortez asserts, “Fiction, with its disenchanted portrayal of life in urban Central American spaces, seeks to accomplish that which *testimonio* also sought: to unveil the inaccuracy of official versions of Central American reality” (Cortez 27)<sup>52</sup>. As a genre that revolves around the investigation of crimes and the questioning of established accounts, the conventions of detective fiction allow these works to function symbiotically alongside *testimonio*.

Whereas *testimonio* centers on the life and actions of the witness, detective fiction is usually concerned, unsurprisingly, with the proceedings and investigation led by the detective. However, as Misha Kokotovich points out in “La ciudad y la novela negra centroamericana”,

Instead of the detective, corruption and criminality are the main focus of contemporary Central American noir narrative. In this sense, Central American postwar works exemplify the most recent trend in the Latin American noir novel: the disappearance of the detective and the lack of faith in a rational investigation as a means of finding the truth and obtaining justice in societies so profoundly corrupt because of neoliberalism that they are even more inaccessible to reason (187)<sup>53</sup>.

In contemporary Central American fiction, the intersection of *testimonio* and detective novels often manifests itself in an overlap between victim and investigator.

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<sup>52</sup> “La ficción, con su retrato desencantado de la vida en los espacios urbanos centroamericanos, busca lograr algo que el *testimonio* también pretendía: poner en evidencia la inexactitud de las versiones oficiales de la realidad centroamericana”. (*Note: unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own*).

<sup>53</sup> En vez del detective, la corrupción y la criminalidad son el enfoque principal de la narrativa negra centroamericana. En este sentido, las obras centroamericanas de la posguerra ejemplifican la tendencia más reciente en la novela negra latinoamericana: la desaparición del detective y la falta de fe en la investigación racional como método para llegar a la verdad y lograr la justicia en sociedades vueltas tan profundamente corruptas a causa del neoliberalismo que resultan cada vez más opacas a la razón” (*My translation; unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own*)

This chapter therefore focuses on the unstable grounds on which witnesses in contemporary Central American fiction stand. As a fundamental aspect of *testimonio*, witness accounts were assumed to have a metonymic relationship to the collective narrative of their community. This relationship is parodied or reconfigured in the novels analyzed here. In *testimonio*, this subject is assumed to speak for the collective body to which he or she belongs, whereas in the hard-boiled novel, the detective is usually disavowed by the community in which he operates. As will be discussed later, contemporary Central American detective novels draw heavily from the hard-boiled variant of detective fiction. Traditionally, a detective like Raymond Chandler's Marlow can be "pained by injustice and intensely sensitive to the social landscape he inhabits" yet is also a loner (McCann), aware that he dwells in a world of treachery and individualism. The crimes in these novels are witnessed by characters—sometimes victims, sometimes investigators, sometimes both—who have distant and often antagonistic relationships to their communities.

Much has been written about the transition in the focus of detective fiction from investigator to criminal. In the aptly titled "The Detective is Dead (Long Live the *Novela Negra!*)" Glen S. Close describes the rise of the criminal and the "death" of the detective in contemporary Latin American *novela negra*. Acknowledging the pendular movement which characterizes the protagonism afforded to detectives and criminals in detective fiction, he argues that "following at least a century of 'police ascendancy' in the international crime story, we may now perhaps discern a trend of 'criminal ascendancy, particularly in the contemporary Latin American market' (147). In turn, Jiménez Nogueroles argues that "Against the classic model, which



privileges the figure of the detective, the *neopolicial* has incorporated the criminal's and the victim's points of view in its plots" (Noguerol)<sup>54</sup>. Accounting for *testimonio*'s prominence in the region, both during and following the civil war, it is not strange that current fictional production in Central America is greatly concerned with the locus of enunciation of the witnesses. Instead of seeking to relativize notions of truth, these texts illustrate the kinds of negotiations and discursive practices by which certain sites of enunciation come to be perceived as legitimate. The authority of witness accounts is determined by their modes of production but also, particularly in the work of Menjívar Ochoa, by the mechanisms of distribution and legitimation which propitiate their circulation.

Before embarking on an account of detective fiction's evolution, beginning with its rise in the XIX century and concluding with its current configuration in Central American literature, a clarification is in order. Detective fiction is here understood in its most general sense: as a narrative that involves a crime and its subsequent investigation by a detective or detective-like figure. Temporal and cultural specificities have given birth to different variants of the genre, and the most relevant ones for purposes of this chapter will be properly unpacked. Suffice it to say, for now, that detective fiction's current design in Central America most prominently incorporates characteristics of the hard-boiled novel –closely related to what has come to be known as the *novela negra* in Spanish and Latin American literature– and the *neopolicial*.

Like most critics (Biron 2000; Sweeney 2010), Leonardo Padura locates the origin of detective fiction in Edgar Allan Poe's 1841 publication of "The Murders of

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<sup>54</sup> Frente al modelo clásico, que privilegia la figura del detective, el neopolicial ha incorporado a las tramas los puntos de vista del criminal y la víctima.

the Rue Morgue” (119). Heta *Pyrhönen* calls Poe the “founder of the genre” (MFAA, 15) and indeed, Poe’s mystery tales seem to foreground much of the criticism dealing with detective fiction. The importance of causality for narrative development —along with the primacy of reason as a means of solving the crime— was central to the early development of the form. All these characteristics were overturned by the hard-boiled genre, exemplified by the 1930s novels of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammet. Moral ambiguity dominates, and the investigative process itself becomes murky and tainted by the corrupt decadence of urban American settings. In fact, “Hard-boiled fiction, traditionally, makes no such appeal to reason and logic, concentrating instead on the character of the detective in a plot normally characterized by violence and betrayal” (Scaggs 28-29). The detective can no longer remain an aloof bystander, as he struggles with his own demons and finds himself engulfed in the chaos of which he is attempting to make sense. Referring to the *novela negra*, a form closely related to the hard-boiled novel, Sonia Mattalia asserts that “The impeccable smoothness of the stories in enigma novels falls apart in the *novela negra*,” which instead focuses on “the images of multiform violence, the scatological description of the crime, the investigator’s vulnerability, the unfurling of disorganized passions” (30)<sup>55</sup>. Although plot and formulaic development continue to play central role in these narratives, characters become more morally complex, and their desires and contradictions begin to influence the investigation at hand.

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<sup>55</sup> “La impecable tersura de las historias de la novela de enigma se desbarata en la novela negra,” which instead focuses on “las imágenes de la poliforme violencia, la descripción escatológica del crimen, la vulnerabilidad del investigador, el despliegue de desordenadas pasiones”

The ideological shift that takes place in the transition from classic detective works of the late XIX and early XX centuries to the hard-boiled novel is reflected in the caustic take on society these texts display, and on the lack of trust they show for institutions of order and justice. Amelia Simpson describes this transition when noting that “In the hard-boiled model, there is more action than puzzling, violence and sex are less subject to censorship, the theme of organized crime is introduced, and a critical and often cynical view of society predominates” (Simpson 12). Ricardo Piglia, who edited *Serie negra* for the Buenos Aires publishing house Tiempo Contemporáneo in the 1960s, was one of those responsible for bringing hard-boiled literature to a wider Latin American audience. His analysis is worth citing at length, as his introduction to *Cuentos de la serie negra* illustrates the unsympathetic take on society espoused by hard-boiled novels, particularly as they decry the ruthlessness of a materialistic world:

The stories of the noir series (the *thrillers* as they’re called in the United States) come to narrate precisely what is excluded and censored in the classic detective novel. There is no longer any mystery in causality: murders, thefts, scams, extortions, the chain is always economic. The money which legislates morality and upholds the law is the only reason behind these stories where everything is paid. The myth of the enigma comes to an end here, or, rather, is displaced. In these stories the detective (when a detective exists) doesn’t only decipher the mysteries of the plot, but finds and discovers the constitution of social classes at every step. The crime is the mirror of society, that is, society observed through the lens of crime” (Introduction to *Cuentos de la serie negra*, 9)<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Los relatos de la serie negra (los *thriller* como los llaman en Estados Unidos) vienen justamente a narrar lo que excluye y censura la novela policial clásica. Ya no hay misterio alguno en la causalidad: asesinatos, robos, estafas, extorsiones, la cadena siempre es económica. El dinero que legisla la moral y sostiene la ley es la única razón de estos relatos donde todo se paga. Allí se termina con el mito del enigma, o mejor, se lo desplaza. En estos relatos el detective (cuando existe) no descifra solamente los misterios de la trama, sino que

Piglia's words can be aptly read in reference to the work of Castellanos Moya, Menjívar Ochoa, and Rey Rosa, where pecuniary advancement functions as central incentive and driving force for their characters. They also reflect a larger phenomenon at work in detective fiction criticism: the prevalence of sociological explanations that focus on economic and social contexts in order to account for the production and widespread distribution of these works. Sonia Mattalia cites Román Gubern, Foucault, and others, to challenge the loose definitions which trace the police novel all the way back to Shakespearean works, in particular Hamlet. For Mattalia, like others, detective fiction is particular to a time and context: industrial society in the XIX century breeds a kind of writing that will not only "represent the social changes and moral anguish, but will be elaborated based on a treatment of the crime based on the investigation and rationalist pride of the nascent detective fiction" (20)<sup>57</sup>. The socioeconomic conditions that enabled the rise of the classic detective tale began to take shape in the beginning of the XX century, thus allowing for the development of the hard-boiled novel. According to Piglia, the Great Depression and the demographic pressure experienced by urban centers in the 1920s are important factors in understanding this literary shift. In fact, he asserts that "it is impossible to analyze the constitution of the *thriller* without taking into account the social situation of the United States towards

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encuentra y descubre a cada paso la determinación de las clases sociales. El crimen es el espejo de la sociedad, esto es, la sociedad es vista desde el crimen

<sup>57</sup> "representará los cambios sociales y las angustias morales, sino que se construirá bajo un tratamiento del crimen basado en la investigación y en el prurito racionalista del naciente relato policial"

the end of the 1920s ” (Piglia, Introducción serie negra, 12)<sup>58</sup>. Later on, in “Sobre el género policial”, included in *Crítica y ficción*, Piglia goes so far as to argue that “I would say that they are capitalist novels in the most literal sense of the word: they must be read, I think, above all as symptoms” (70)<sup>59</sup>. That is, a great deal of detective fiction criticism conceives of its object of study to be intimately linked to extraliterary conditions, particularly with the economic model at work in a given region. This approach has informed canonical critical texts dealing with detective fiction in Latin America in general and Central America in particular. The link between detective fiction and *testimonio* is thus strengthened by the former’s emphasis on social commentary and the latter’s reliance upon an extraliterary reality.

Beyond Piglia’s work on the Serie Negra’s catalogue, authors like Mexican Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Spaniard Manuel Vázquez Montalbán contributed to the *novela negra*’s ascendancy in Spanish language literature during the 1970s. *Novela negra*, in turn, was how the form came to be known due to Gallimard’s earlier decision to name its series of translated hard-boiled fiction *Série Noire* –books which in turn were published with black covers. Glen S. Close traces this rise of the *novela negra* in Latin America during this time to the fact that it “denounced and imaginarily combated the criminal contamination of economic and political institutions, foremost among them, the authoritarian state,” adding that “In retrospect, perhaps its principal distinction was its attempt to modify the essentially individualistic and populist orientation that rendered the U.S. hard-boiled novel, for all its disenchanting

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<sup>58</sup> “es imposible analizar la constitución del *thriller* sin tener en cuenta la situación social de los Estados Unidos hacia el final de la década de los 20

<sup>59</sup> “yo diría que son novelas capitalistas en el sentido más literal de la palabra: deben ser leídas, pienso, ante todo como síntomas”

skepticism, ideologically integrative in the view of many critics” (Close, 145). The hard-boiled model became a fruitful one for addressing questions of justice, violence, and power relations in Latin American societies.

In *Crimes Against the State, Crimes Against Persons*, Persephone Braham argues for the existence of a Latin American form similar to the *novela negra*. A fundamental difference, however, was that such a form was explicitly politically driven. For Braham, “The *neopoliciaco* represents a reaction against the mythologizing aestheticism of the Latin American *boom* of the 1960s and 1970s. Coarse, realistic, and chaotic, it is marked by the same pessimistic idealism as the first hard-boiled fiction” (12). On one hand, the *neopoliciaco* reacts against the literary tradition at work during the Latin American Boom, but it also goes beyond that. Braham asserts that the *neopoliciaco* is “is more overtly political and leftist than the American hard-boiled novel, and in keeping with its social concerns, portrays the life of the detective in a more detailed manner” (Braham xiii). A term coined by Paco Ignacio Taibo II, the *neopolicial* deals with the “problems of the State as a producer of crimes, corruption, and political arbitrariness” (Argüelles 14)<sup>60</sup>. Taibo II’s detective Boloascarán Shayne is a leftist investigator who, after working for General Electric, becomes aware of the social chaos in Mexico and the corruption characteristic of the state. While the detective in the *novela negra* finds a solution to the crime and attempts to restore some kind of precarious order, the *neopolicial*’s investigator opens up broader questions of social justice and the struggles of marginalized communities. Additionally, as Nogueroles points out, the *neopolicial* often incorporates

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<sup>60</sup> “problemas del Estado como generador del crimen, la corrupción, la arbitrariedad política”

extraliterary discourses such as journalistic pieces, testimonial accounts, or televised newsreels. According to Noguero, Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación Masacre* could therefore be conceived as one of the *neopolicial*'s precursors. It is significant that *Operación Masacre* is also described by Jon Beasley-Murray as "what is arguably the very first Latin American testimonio" (267), thus establishing a common thread between both textual forms discussed in this chapter.

Glen S. Close offers a similar assessment while analyzing the adoption of the hard-boiled in Latin America during the second half of the XX century. Although he never refers specifically to the *neopolicial*, Close notes that "the Latin American *novela negra* embraced the critical consciousness of the classic U.S. hard-boiled novel, but often sought at least a covert politicization of the private investigative enterprise" (*Detective Fiction* 145). In contrast to the likes of Chandler's Phillip Marlowe or Hammett's Sam Spade, the code of these detectives is not limited to loyalty towards the client or money. The hard-boiled in Latin America also offered a portrayal of society which was characterized by corrupt officials and institutions of the law which served those in positions of privilege. For Sklodowska, it is thanks to this worldview that "In that tradition that begins with Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler several Latin American writers have found the ideal means to give shape to their social and political commitment" (*Parodia* 112)<sup>61</sup>.

As a challenge to \ prevailing social and economic conditions, contemporary detective fiction in Latin America (and in particular the *neopolicial*) goes beyond a

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<sup>61</sup> "En esta vertiente que arranca de Dashiell Hammett y Raymond Chandler varios escritores hispanoamericanos han encontrado un vehículo idóneo para encauzar su compromiso social y político"

critical reading of the dire situations faced by marginalized groups. These works also challenge the manners in which knowledge is produced and legitimized. In her study of Argentinian detective fiction, Sonia Mattalia asserts that “My hypothesis is that detective fiction provides Argentinian narrative with a series of figures—the criminal and the investigator, the enigma and its revelation, crime and the law—with which certain fictions argue against State fictions (Mattalia 14)<sup>62</sup>. The Argentinian critic explains that detective fiction works first and foremost with the axis of knowledge, given that it is based on processes of investigation and elucidation of unknowns. For Persephone Braham, “The Latin American detective genre exemplifies the primary hermeneutic predicament facing the intellectual subject: how to interpret a reality that fundamentally resists ontological commitments” (Braham 17). The murky and violent grounds on which these detectives conduct their investigations produce all kinds of moral and epistemological quandaries. For Glen S. Close, said conditions affected the manner in which detective fiction evolved differently in peninsular and continental literature, arguing that “I trace the *novela negra*’s profound inscription of what sociologists have termed the ‘new urban violence’ of the neoliberal era, proposing that the intensification of criminal violence in Spanish American cities has dictated a divergence between Spanish American and Spanish crime fiction” (*Transatlantic discourse* 19).

Costa Rican writer Uriel Quezada conducted one of the few exhaustive studies on the development of detective fiction in Central America. In his genealogical work

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<sup>62</sup> “Mi hipótesis es que el policial provee a la narrativa argentina una serie de figuras –la del criminal y del investigador, el enigma y su revelación, el crimen y la ley– con las cuales las ficciones literarias polemizan con las ficciones estatales”



“¿Por qué estos crímenes? Literatura policiaca en Centroamérica,” he argues that the contemporary Central American detective novel begins with *Castigo divino* (1988), by Sergio Ramírez, “which starts out from the narration of possible murders in order to explore the problem of historical truth, an elusive truth, which challenges the legal framework in which it is generated” (172)<sup>63</sup>. *Castigo divino* makes use of the detective genre as a means of questioning a “recognizable and acceptable criteria for truth” (Quezada 173)<sup>64</sup> found in the historicist discourse that underlies the novel. This investigation into the production and legitimation of an official truth on behalf of the state certainly anticipated some of the main concerns of the genre in the region, and resonates powerfully with Mattalia’s and Braham’s insights.

Although Misha Kokotovich’s analysis of detective fiction in Central America focuses on the detective novel’s link with the socioeconomic conditions at the time of their production, his article also provides a comprehensive analysis of several formal and thematic features common to these works. In said novels, the detective is not central or simply does not exist, and the investigation frequently ends in failure. This assessment resonates with traits of the anti-detective novel as theorized by Stefano Tani in *The Doomed Detective* (1984). Tani’s critical undertaking drew attention to the postmodernist characteristics of much detective fiction in the latter part of the XX century, including the deconstruction of rational or scientific approaches to crime typical of classic detective fictions. Such traits, as will be further described, are particularly present in the work of Rodrigo Rey Rosa. But Kokotovich also notes that,

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<sup>63</sup> “que parte del relato de los posibles asesinatos para explorar el problema de la verdad histórica, una verdad elusiva, que pone en crisis el marco legal en el que se genera”

<sup>64</sup> “criterio de verdad reconocible y aceptable”

although sympathetic towards revolutionary projects of yore, these Central American texts also show a profound disenchantment with the revolutionary experience (186-187: 2012). Kokotovich goes on to argue such disillusionment is manifested in the “parodic recycling of testimonio, the literary genre most linked to the revolutionary struggles of the seventies and eighties” (187)<sup>65</sup>. The postwar literary production in Central America is no longer focused on collective projects of liberation; it certainly does not espouse a defense of the individual either. Rather, it reveals that the individual’s so-called freedom of choice is just another fallacy of neoliberalism (Kokotovich, 192: 2012).

The previous historical overview of the major trends in detective fiction allows us to better frame the texts analyzed in this chapter. While drawing from the *neopolicial* in their challenge of state truths and their questioning of official versions, these novels avoid clear-cut investigations and provide ambiguous resolutions. Additionally, unlike traditional *neopolicial*, they refrain from expressing any clear-cut sympathy for progressive political projects. The second tradition all of these texts draw from is the hard-boiled. Apart from offering grim perspectives on the corruption of contemporary urban centers (a common trope in hard-boiled fiction), many of these investigators, fashioned after hard-boiled detectives, offer the perfect counterpoints for testimonial subjects. Whereas the latter constitute a subject speaking for a collective body and as such appeal to readers’ solidarity, the former are characterized by a cynical view on mankind and on the productive possibilities of collective projects.

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<sup>65</sup> “reciclaje paródico del testimonio, el género literario más fuertemente ligado a las luchas revolucionarias de los setenta y ochenta”

*Piedras encantadas* (2001), one of Rey Rosa's earlier novels, explicitly draws from the hard-boiled tradition to describe a hit-and-run that nearly kills a young boy in Guatemala City. The novel revolves around three characters directly linked to the crime: Silvestre, the victim, Joaquín Casasola, an accomplice to the perpetrator, and the picturesque detective Emilio Rastelli. While the omniscient narrator's perspective shifts from one character to the next throughout the story—acknowledging the characters' peripheral relationships and concerns—the crime takes center stage. Like traditional hard-boiled works, *Piedras encantadas* begins with the body of the crime, and the narrative follows the investigation as it goes neck-deep in a city seeped in corruption. However, in a departure from the standard conventions hard-boiled, each piece of evidence serves to further obscure the crime, revealing an array of illegal activities which permeate all sectors of Guatemalan society.

It all begins with a horseback ride in Avenida Las Américas. Silvestre, a young boy, rides at ease when an SVU crashes into him and throws him from his horse, nearly killing him before speeding away. The reader soon learns that the driver is Armando, a good friend of Joaquín Casasola, who lives in an apartment in a wealthy area of the city not far from where the accident occurs. Joaquín provides a temporary hiding place for Armando as his friend contacts a lawyer to figure out his next steps. When Silvestre's mother learns of the incident, she hires Emilio Rastelli to track down the responsible party.

The novel is divided into twenty one chapters, which in turn are bracketed by an introduction and a closing section in italics. This initial section opens with a description of Guatemala as “the most beautiful country, the ugliest people” (Rey

Rosa, 9)<sup>66</sup>, and follows with a description of the violent, decadent society in which the events of the novel take place. Rey Rosa would later be criticized at the local level for his unfavorable depiction of his homeland. Curiously, in an interview he explained himself as follow: “Maybe I should have said ‘the most beautiful country, the ugliest city’ because I referred in particular to the people of the capital city, where the story takes place” (García)<sup>67</sup>. Guatemala City, as it is, frames the entire novel. In fact, the capital city seems to introduce and give birth to the narrative at hand, given that the bracketing preliminary section focuses on the urban landscape in which the events to follow unfold. The initial description foreshadows but also explains the criminal activities that take place: “Guatemala City. Two hundred squared kilometers of asphalt and concrete (produced and monopolized by one family during the past century). Prototype of a hard city, where rich people move around in armored vehicles and the most successful businessmen wear bulletproof vests” (9)<sup>68</sup>. This initial section sets up a tension between fact and fiction. On one hand, it establishes a setting of real referents which endow the narrative with a concrete extraliterary dimension. Simultaneously, however, it implicates the reader in the fictional account by identifying him with one of the main characters: “You’re called Joaquín Casasola, you don’t dislike the sound of your name (...). You have relatives and childhood friends

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<sup>66</sup> “el país más hermoso, la gente más fea”

<sup>67</sup> “Tal vez debí decir “el país más hermoso, la ciudad más fea” porque me refería particularmente a la gente de la capital, donde ocurre la historia”

<sup>68</sup> “Ciudad de Guatemala. Doscientos kilómetros cuadrados de asfalto y hormigón (producido y monopolizado por una familia durante el último siglo). Prototipo de una ciudad dura, donde la gente rica va en blindados y los hombres de negocios más exitosos llevan chalecos antibalas”

here, and that –you think but you’re wrong– will make things easy for you” (12)<sup>69</sup>. In fact, this is not just a mechanism that identifies reader and character, but also serves as a warning: what happens in this text happens in real life, Rey Rosa seems to suggest, what happens to this character, could happen to you too.

In a way, *Piedras encantadas* traces a topography of injustice, by charting the criminal history embedded in the streets and landmarks of the city. According to Mackenbach and Ortiz Wallner, “It is the image of the city as *locus terribilis*: all the nightmares are concentrated in it and ask who could and how can one live in this place” (Mackenbach and Wallner 88). The narrator constantly interjects comments which unveil the omnipresent hypocrisy and violence of Guatemalan society, particularly visible in the names of avenues and sites throughout the city: Armando “drove down the Sexta Avenida towards Liberación Boulevard (commemorative of the overthrowing of the first democratic attempt in the isthmus)” (55), and Joaquín “went towards the Centro Comercial Los Próceres (of the dubious national independence)”, while the Paseo de la Reforma is actually named after “The ruthless reform which abolished the right of Guatemalan indigenous people to communal lands so that they would instead be converted into coffee plantations” (23). The city itself becomes the origin and site of a testimonial narrative: on one hand, it circumscribes the text which details the crime, thus endowing the events with authenticity and the

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<sup>69</sup> “Te llamas Joaquín Casasola, y no te disgusta el sonido de tu nombre (...). Aquí tienes parientes ricos y amigos de la infancia, y eso –piensas pero te equivocas– te facilitará las cosas”

“Bajó por la Sexta Avenida hacia el bulevar Liberación (conmemorativo del derrocamiento del primer intento democrático en el istmo)” / “se dirigió al Centro Comercial los Próceres (de la dudosa independencia nacional)”, while the Paseo de la Reforma is actually named after “La despiadada reforma que abolió el derecho de los indígenas guatemaltecos a sus tierras comunales para que fueran convertidas en plantaciones de café”

narrator with legitimacy as a source of local knowledge. On the other hand, the city speaks of a recurrent, historically-determined criminal activity, where neighborhoods are linked to past and present crimes that allow for the widespread discrimination and abuse of power.

The crime presented in the novel, as in most crimes that appear in Rey Rosa's work, is never solved. It is unclear whether the hit-and-run was the only worthwhile cause for investigation. A flashback of the so-called accident shows Silvestre, the boy, riding the horse before something is heard, a sound resembling "An explosion. A burst of fireworks? or of bullets? The screeching of tires. A horn. *Crack!*" (33)<sup>70</sup>. The possibility that an attempted murder was also to blame for the accident (a bullet casing is found near the area) points the finger at Silvestre's dad, a sinister character who is owed money and owes money himself. Multiple hypotheses are offered by different characters throughout the novel, but it is detective Rastelli who best seems to understand the stakes and the events surrounding the crime.

Detective Rastelli is crafted after the mold established by traditional hard-boiled fiction. Despite being cynical about the moral quality of men in general, he abides by a moral code himself. The reader learns that he was "an atheist (he was convinced) and according to him this constituted a clear moral and intellectual advantage over most of his countrymen, religious and fanatic out of natural inclination. He did not see any future for 'mankind', did not dream of a peaceful

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<sup>70</sup> Una explosión. Una ráfaga de cohetes? o de balas? Un rechinar de neumáticos. Una bocina. *Crack!*

world” (47)<sup>71</sup>. After Silvestre manages to survive the accident, it is Rastelli who visits him in the hospital and helps him escape. He is convinced Silvestre is still in danger, and despite receiving payment for his investigation by Silvestre’s mother, Rastelli believes he must help the boy. He provides limited assistance, simply guiding the boy to the street and asking him to lay low, but in a context of betrayal and corruption, his actions make him stand out. Instances of solidarity are therefore scarce, arbitrary, and fleetingly slip through a widespread net of Machiavellian behaviors.

Rastelli’s activities, however, also provide a different take on the city—a take which is no less grim, given that he’s accustomed to navigating the Guatemalan crime world, but one that reveals the city’s underbelly and inner workings. Guatemala is referred to as a “police city”<sup>72</sup> (56). This is not due to the presence of a police force or state security apparatus; it refers, rather, to those beings that operate in the shadows of the law. Informers, private detectives, spies, different individuals who can help those in need of extralegal assistance, always in exchange for large amounts of money, and with “the condition that never, under no circumstance, you reveal their real name” (82)<sup>73</sup>.

A Foucaultian reading of detective fiction has certainly been in effect since the classic work of D.A Miller in *The Novel and the Police*, a critical study which went as far as identifying the Victorian novel itself as a form of policing, as a mechanism of disciplinary culture. In *Fictions of Detection and the Imperial Venture*, Caroline Reitz

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<sup>71</sup> “ateo (estaba convencido) y según él esto constituía una clara ventaja moral e intelectual sobre la mayoría de sus conciudadanos, religiosos y fanáticos por inclinación natural. Él no veía futuro alguno para <<el hombre>>, no soñaba con un mundo pacífico”

<sup>72</sup> “ciudad policial”

<sup>73</sup> “la condición de que jamás, con ningún pretexto, reveles su verdadero nombre”

warns against the danger of applying Foucault's ideas indiscriminately to detective novels, particularly given that it is tempting to extrapolate his notions on the panopticum to all kinds of contexts. Sonia Mattalia, in turn, argues that "to read in detective fiction, in its history and its changes, one of the channels of glorification of panopticum society is correct, but it also is to appreciate in its path the ironic, critical, or parodic charge of the modern state's omnipotence" (23)<sup>74</sup>. In the Guatemalan realm of *Piedras encantadas*, the omnipresent surveillance to which all characters are subjected (and to which they subject others) resonates with Mattalia's reading of Foucault for purposes of Latin American detective fiction, where the state's waning monopoly on violence and information has given rise to new actors. Rastelli, as a private eye accustomed to navigating the Guatemalan underworld, is well aware that different forms of social control are always in effect, with all kinds of information supplied by an army of informers. In fact, "tens of thousands of Guatemalans participated in the dark business of information. Any of your acquaintances was or could be an 'informer' " (56)<sup>75</sup>. Knowledge is a form of currency that distinguishes those with power from those who don't have it, as is evident by "*Abogángsters*" (25) like Vallina, who manages to clear Armando from any legal responsibility. "Abogángster", as the name implies, are lawyers with gangster characteristics; that is, they operate within the law by resorting to all kinds of extralegal means. To a great extent, their comparative advantage resides in their connections with informants who

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<sup>74</sup> "leer en la narración policial, en su historia y sus cambios, uno de los canales de glorificación de la sociedad panóptica es cierto, pero también apreciar en su andadura la carga irónica, crítica o paródica de la omnipotencia del estado moderno"

<sup>75</sup> "decenas de miles de guatemaltecos participaban en el oscuro negocio de la información. Cualquiera de tus conocidos era o podía ser <<oreja>>".



can provide official, confidential information. An example of this, perhaps even more sinister than “abogangsters”, is “a special class of secret agent,” such as one referred to as “the Shadow” (83)<sup>76</sup>. The Shadow, like Vallina and so many others, straddles the line separating official and unofficial spheres, and it is precisely thanks this versatility that they’re sought out by those in need of information or arrangements of dubious legality. The Shadow, for instance, has access to “El Guacamolón”, as the National Palace is colloquially referred to<sup>77</sup>. El Guacamolón is one of the places where delicate information is received, processed and put to use through a computer, courtesy of the American government, which “classifies photographs and videotapes, describes relations and places, making diagnostics and recommendations. Some thirty thousand informers work to feed the monster (82)<sup>78</sup>. The original, singular crime –a seemingly unintentional hit-and-run– leads the reader through a winding maze that sheds light on the widespread corruption of Guatemalan society. The multiple perspectives on the nature of the crime provide a collective, yet sometimes contradictory, set of hypotheses. The reader, like Joaquín Casasola, is caught in the middle of this uncertainty, knowing only that a prevalent state of surveillance guarantees someone else always knows more than he does. In the end, this is the only possible testimony to arise from a place like Guatemala City, characterized as it is by hidden agendas and physical landmarks that mystify the conditions of injustice which have made its very construction possible.

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<sup>76</sup> “una clase especial de agente secreto”/ “la Sombra”

<sup>77</sup> The National Palace of Guatemala is a massive building, rusted green with time; hence, “El Guacamolón”.

<sup>78</sup> “clasifica fotos y videocintas, describe relaciones y lugares, hace diagnósticos y recomendaciones. Unos treinta mil informantes trabajan para alimentar al monstruo”

The ever-present surveillance found in *Piedras encantadas* is a common subplot in Rafael Menjívar Ochoa's novels, which are fashioned after the conventions of the traditional hard-boiled genre. His protagonists live in the shadows of the law, offering grim perspectives on the cities they inhabit and on humankind in general. They have strong convictions, and usually view the world in black or white terms. In *Cualquier forma de morir*, published in 1998, the unnamed protagonist explains that "The world is divided into two kinds of people: those who die and those who kill" (26)<sup>79</sup>. Menjívar Ochoa's characters belong to criminal organizations and parallel structures of power, often acting as henchmen as they enforce the will of those who lead their groups. In the cases here discussed, however, they fulfill the roles of detectives. They achieve this despite occupying positions in the lower echelons of their respective organization, which limits their knowledge regarding the crimes they participate in. They must, therefore, put their minds and their fists to work in order to understand how their actions fit into the greater scheme of things, and how it is that they are being double-crossed—all these works recurrently address the act of betrayal, a theme already present in Menjívar Ochoa's first novel, *Historia del traidor nunca jamás* (1985). Oftentimes retaining an inkling of a conscience, these protagonists choose to aid some of the weaker individuals who get in the path of their criminal activities. Menjívar's novels reveal the flip side of *testimonio*: these characters speak only for themselves and no one else, as they act as consenting witnesses to the atrocities in which they participate.

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<sup>79</sup> "El mundo se divide en dos: los que se mueren y los que matan"

The protagonists in these texts are certainly witnesses—they observe the violence and pain inflicted on those who are lower on the food chain—and often empathize with the victims as the plot unravels and further information becomes available. However, they are also, whether directly or indirectly, the perpetrators of these crimes: lonely creatures that resort to violence or are forced into using or condoning it. It is in this ambivalence that Menjívar Ochoa's characters battle with their moral dilemmas, and it is in this tension that the Salvadorean's oeuvre establishes a dialogue between testimonial narratives and detective fiction.

The question here is not one of denouncing the crime; after all, these crimes occur in dark allies, under cover of night, or between the soundproof walls of torture chambers. The press is easily bought-off, the police force full of snitches, the general population largely at the mercy of those in power. However, this collective tragedy brings to the forefront the ethical dilemma that these protagonists must face: whether to heed the weak outcries of their consciences, or to carry out the job with which they have been entrusted. As Emiliano Coello Gutiérrez explains in “El pícaro como protagonista en las novelas neopoliciales de Rafael Menjívar Ochoa y Horacio Castellanos Moya”, “the measuring stick of the individual's actions is no longer determined by a moral scale and is guided, on the contrary, by the desire to survive” (6)<sup>80</sup>. While Menjívar Ochoa's characters certainly share the humble origins and unstable identity of the *pícaro*, it is also true that, like the *pícaro*, they are resourceful individuals who fight to live another day. Their moral compass, then, points only to survival.

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<sup>80</sup> “la vara de medir de las acciones del individuo deja de estar supeditada a una determinada escala de valores y se guía, contrariamente, por la supervivencia”

Menjívar Ochoa's protagonists have a very particular relationship with the collective bodies to which they simultaneously belong and eschew. In *Los años marchitos*, the narrator is a *radionovela* actor who can replicate any voice he hears. As will be discussed in detail, he is therefore metonymically linked to his community in its entirety. In the case of *Cualquier forma de morir*, the main character's disfiguration allows him to adopt any identity following facial reconstruction, effectively granting him anonymity. In *De vez en cuando la muerte*, the hard-boiled reporter functions as a gateway between the private and the public sphere, pursuing investigations that lead to sensationalist news pieces. As Uriel Quezada explains, Menjívar Ochoa's characters "unfold, they attempt to be someone else according to the circumstances that surround them" (174)<sup>81</sup>. In fact, in both *Cualquier forma de morir* and *Los heroes tienen sueño* (1998), Menjívar Ochoa's characters function as archetypes, as none of them are called by proper names but are instead referred to by generic nicknames. "El Perro", "El Cura", or "El Comandante" all belong to Menjívar Ochoa's underworld, disposable beings only distinguished by their generic pseudonyms.

With *Los años marchitos*, Menjívar Ochoa begins the trilogy of crime novels for which he is best known. *Los años marchitos* follows the standard structure of the detective novel. A corpse is found, a crime is presented, and the protagonist finds himself struggling through a sea of contradictory evidence and hidden agendas. The promise of a handsome sum of money pushes him forward in what is surely a job too good to be true.

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<sup>81</sup> "se desdoblán, pretenden o procuran ser otros de acuerdo con las circunstancias que los rodean"

The protagonist of *Los años marchitos* has a unique talent: he is able to reproduce, with precise accent and intonation, any voice he hears. His job as a voice actor for a *radionovela* is based on his ability to impersonate all kinds of villains. Nevertheless, this capacity poses somewhat of an occupational challenge as he goes from station to station seeking work, given that his current job is not enough to pay the bills. All of the radio networks have “enough villains to make three mega-productions of scoundrels without a single hero showing up” (20)<sup>82</sup>, a situation which appears to reflect on society’s dire circumstances. In addition, the narrator’s villains are so well known that he is condemned to eternal typecasting. In a time when heroes are the order of the day, he wanders aimlessly in search of a job. Voice impersonation in advertising, especially, is out of the question. As his boss explains, “If you were to make a Coca Cola add, Coca Cola would go bankrupt. It’s that simple” (12)<sup>83</sup>.

It all changes when he is offered a new opportunity. The secret police are looking to hire him, and willing to pay handsomely. While the job description is vague and the people involved are suspicious at best, the offer of fifteen thousand dollars is sufficiently convincing. Gradually, the narrator realizes the job has to do with the death of Jiménez Fresedo, a wealthy, leftist politician who was recently kidnapped and murdered. While two suspects were arrested and put into custody, little if any information has been released to the press. Once he takes the job, the narrator receives a recording in the voice of one of the kidnappers. It takes him some time to figure out what his own role will be:

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<sup>82</sup> “suficientes villanos para hacer tres superproducciones de mafiosos sin que apareciera un solo héroe”

<sup>83</sup> “Si haces un anuncio de la Coca-Cola, quiebra la Coca-Cola. Así de sencillo”

You want me to use the voice of the dark-skinned guy to say that he kidnapped Jiménez Fresedo, I don't know if whether for political reasons or for money, or both, but the point is for him to confess; to give names of accomplices, which I'm sure you already know about. I don't know if a recording such as that one will have value in a legal trial, but I'm sure you can make any trial legal (76)<sup>84</sup>.

Immediately, the issue of legality comes to the forefront of the story. As the narrator himself reflects, there is no need for this evidence to be admissible or effective in trial, as the legal system is controlled by the same groups paying him to record the confession. These same groups, it turns out, have murdered Jiménez Fresedo in order to rid themselves of a potential competitor in the presidential elections. Despite the protagonist's talent and his dedication to the job, the quality of the impersonation has little or no importance. What matters is the recording itself, the confession, the trace which attests to a crime. One can read the newspaper, his sinister employer explains, and find news which one must believe no matter what. In fact, "it may be that you don't share the journalist's or the interpretation, but you don't doubt that the event, any event whatsoever, actually took place (Menjívar Ochoa 1990: 79)<sup>85</sup>. The testimony he will forge is completely divorced from the conditions which propitiated it. Its power resides not in its words, and even less so in the subject which conferred it, but rather in the channels that distribute and legitimize it.

The issue of legitimacy and, concomitantly, legality is, of course, central to testimonial narratives. As Joanna Bartow ponders, "To legitimate' is to prove or

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<sup>84</sup> "Quiere que use la voz del muchacho moreno para decir que secuestró a Jiménez Fresedo, no sé si por cuestiones políticas o por dinero, o por ambas, pero que confiese; que dé nombres de cómplices, que ustedes de seguro ya conocen. No sé si una grabación como ésta valga en un juicio legal, pero estoy seguro de que ustedes pueden hacer legal cualquier juicio"

<sup>85</sup> "puede ser que no comparta el enfoque o la interpretación del reportero, pero no duda de que el hecho, un hecho cualquiera, se produjera en efecto"

justify the truth of something or the character of a person or thing in conformity to the law. Whose law? Before whom does one legitimate oneself and with what authority? How do, or must, the disenfranchised legitimate themselves?” (Bartow 35). *Testimonio* acts as the site of cross-legitimation: transcriber and testimonial subject make use of each other’s positions to strengthen their own and, in turn, guarantee the texts’ authority. In *Los años marchitos*, this scaffolding is done away with, as legitimacy resides outside any of the conditions which made the testimony’s construction possible.

The narrator’s recording dooms the accused party, but it also does more than that. It is no coincidence he is a voice-actor. He is capable of being anyone and everyone; through the radio he is anonymous and at the same time he is ubiquitous. Referring to *Los años marchitos*, Beatriz Cortez asserts that “The interesting thing is that the character presents himself emphatically as an empty body, a body searching for an identity that will occupy him” (*Estética* 202)<sup>86</sup>. He knows he was not, “nor would ever be, a face before an audience: he was a voice-making machine. Voices as low or high-pitched as my throat would allow and the corresponding character would demand” (61)<sup>87</sup>. The narrator not only speaks for the collective body; in a kind of reversal of *testimonio*’s traditional metonymic relationship, his talent allows him to *be* the collective body.

In addition, the narrator is haunted by the dilemmas constantly faced by detectives in hard-boiled fiction. On the one hand, he must stay true to a code of

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<sup>86</sup> “Lo interesante es que el personaje se presenta a sí mismo de manera enfática como un cuerpo vacío, un cuerpo en busca de una identidad que lo ocupe”

<sup>87</sup> “ni sería nunca, un rostro ante el público: era una máquina de hacer voces. Voces tan graves o tan agudas como me lo permitiera la garganta y me lo exigiera el personaje de turno”

professional ethics; that is, he must abide by the agreed upon contract. On the other hand, the task at hand is at odds with his personal moral code. While the protagonist does not seem particularly invested in any political project, he knows that his acted-out confession will condemn a man who is very likely not guilty. Emiliano Coello's distinction between the traditional hard-boiled novel and contemporary Central American *neopolicial* seems relevant at this point: "the critique is not only against capitalism (and its neoliberal derivation in this case), but also against the implementation of revolutionary systems in the Isthmus. In one case and in the other these narratives show an individual who is squashed by collective projects, which limit and coerce his freedom" (Coello Gutiérrez)<sup>88</sup>. The lone ranger of *Los años marchitos* does not adhere to any kind of collective enterprise, but chooses instead to stay true to his professional responsibilities. The ethical commitment is thus of a different order.

The issue here becomes one of fidelity, in its double meaning: to be true to his principles, the narrator must be true to the voice he impersonates. This is exactly what his employer appreciates when he states that "You are a responsible actor, yes, committed to your trade, and I like that" (74)<sup>89</sup>. Certainly, such perspective functions as a mechanism that allows the narrator to avoid facing his responsibility in the death he will indirectly propitiate. In this manner, Menjívar Ochoa's novel plays with two central tensions. On the one hand, the line separating the individual and the collective

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<sup>88</sup> "la crítica no solo se ejerce contra el capitalismo (y su derivación neoliberal en este caso), sino también contra la puesta en práctica en el Istmo de los sistemas revolucionarios. En uno y otro caso las narraciones dan cuenta de un individuo aplastado por los proyectos colectivos, que limitan y coercen su libertad"

<sup>89</sup> "Es usted un actor responsable, sí, responsable con su oficio, y eso me gusta"



body is constantly blurred. The protagonist is unique precisely because he can be anyone. His escape into the characters he portrays also allows him to escape responsibility for those characters' actions. As a dedicated professional, he is a method-actor who moves in and out of the psyches of those he must impersonate. Paradoxically, by empathizing with these subjects he effectively frees himself from any sense of responsibility the actions of those subjects might carry with them. After all, their intentions and their incentives become his own.

This murky sense of responsibility leads to the second tension found in the novel: the impossibility of clearly separating perpetrators from victims. The narrator, used to playing all kinds of villains on the radio, suddenly finds himself in a position where his actions could (and do) have dire consequences for others. His moral flexibility seems to be coherent with the chameleonic nature of his job. He states that:

My dreams didn't include images, but rather voices, many voices which, however, were one and the same. A multiple voice confessing abominable crimes. All the voices were those of the glabrous and dark-skinned guy. But there were also long silences, tangible and oppressive, and they were the voice of the dead *trigueño* and of Jiménez Fresedo (57)<sup>90</sup>.

The potential ventriloquism so criticized in testimonial narratives is taken to its extreme in *Los años marchitos*. The testimony becomes pure fabrication, and the testimonial subject is merely invoked by the protagonist in order to serve as a kind of

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<sup>90</sup> "Mis sueños no fueron de imágenes, sino de voces, muchas voces que, sin embargo, eran una sola y la misma. Una voz múltiple confesando crímenes abominables. Todas las voces eran la del muchacho moreno y lampiño. Pero también había largos silencios, tangibles y opresivos, y eran la voz del trigueño muerto y la de Jiménez Fresedo"

inspirational muse for a false impersonation. He will provide a confession that will effectively condemn the *trigueño* to infamy and certain death.

After some hesitation, the narrator agrees to grant the false testimony. For a hefty sum of fifteen thousand dollars, he will record the confession and then appear before a group of state-paid reporters, who will ask him the agreed upon questions and replay the answers on the radio. Yet the obvious staging involved, the obscenity of it all, brings a truly performative aspect to the narrator's words. When asked if he did in fact kill Jiménez Fresedo, he feels that "Inside of me, the *trigueño* was silent for a long time. And, personally, I was beginning to get irritated with it all. I didn't want to be there. It wasn't my conscience; I just didn't want to be there. But the *trigueño* had installed himself in my body, with his voice and gestures, and nothing depended on me" (114)<sup>91</sup>. The process of ventriloquism is reversed, and the voice actor becomes an instrument for the *trigueño*. A prosopopeic inversion is suddenly at work, one which grants the testimony a kind of life of its own, liberated from the middleman who facilitates it.

In the end, there is a kind of bittersweet resolution to the novel. The protagonist's words are recorded, he is paid handsomely, and the job is over. The testimony paradoxically functions as a final act of independence, even if it exists as language detached from a conscious subject of enunciation. Granting testimony in this

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<sup>91</sup>"Dentro de mí, el muchacho trigueño guardó un silencio muy largo. Y a mí, en lo personal, comenzaba a irritarme todo. No quería estar allí. No me remordía la conciencia; simplemente no quería estar allí. Pero el trigueño se me había instalado en el cuerpo, con su voz y sus gestos, y nada dependía de mí"

staged setting seems to produce a text beyond the control of the narrator, or anyone else for that matter.

The unnamed first-person narrator from *De vez en cuando la muerte*, the third novel in Menjívar Ochoa's noir trilogy, is a journalist, yet has all the familiar symptoms of a hard-boiled detective. As a journalist, he finds himself in the business of investigation, and navigates a city seeped in corruption in an attempt to find the juiciest, most sensationalist pieces of news. He is certainly no puzzle solver, rather distancing himself from the *whodunnit* tradition and adopting the rougher edges of Chandler's investigators: "I placed the chess pieces on the chessboard, I looked at them for a while and put them back in their place, next to the sugar. In reality I hated chess. Neither was it any good to read the first seven lines of an Agatha Christie book" (117)<sup>92</sup>. Unlike traditional hard-boiled detectives, however, this journalist lacks commitment to the case he's currently researching. Instead, he is drawn to his profession for its versatility, for the possibility to act as both investigator and victimizer through his discretionary use of the secrets discovered by any and all means possible.

The reader learns of the first crime the narrator had to deal with when he joined the newspaper he works at: a young girl walked into the police precinct to turn herself in for murdering her uncle, aunt, and their dog. The crime scene was ghastly, with blood and bodily remains scattered throughout the house. For the first-person narrator, however, resolution of the crime was secondary to the journalistic possibilities of such

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<sup>92</sup> "Coloqué las piezas en el tablero de ajedrez, las miré un rato y las volví a poner en su lugar, junto al azúcar. En realidad detestaba el ajedrez. Tampoco sirvió de nada leer las primeras siete líneas de un libro de Agatha Christie"

a finding, and perhaps more importantly, his position of distant witness allowed him to question the validity of judiciary processes. He recalls how “My first important case, that of the girl, taught me that everything’s relative: it was impossible that she had killed her aunt and uncle, but it couldn’t be otherwise. And she was innocent even if she was guilty” (153)<sup>93</sup>. Moral ambiguity is present throughout the book, and this, in turn, seems to justify the protagonist’s questionable journalistic practices.

Metaliterary gestures abound in *De vez en cuando la muerte*. References to pulp fiction and classic detective novelists such as Agatha Christie constantly distract the reader from the narrative at hand, and focus the attention on the production of a sensationalist journalistic discourse. Referring to the investigation in which he is involved, the narrator states that “The plot of the detective novel had become disappointing” (115)<sup>94</sup>. It seems that the same logic underpinning the functioning of the text before the reader is at work in the different versions revolving around the central murder in the novel. That is, journalistic discourse and novelistic discourse are placed side by side, and both are measured according to the entertainment possibilities they might provide. Extraliterary reality is only prized insofar as it can be adopted into an operative detective fiction esthetic.

The main plot revolves around Mauro C., an imprisoned murderer who is responsible for killing a vast but unknown number of women. The narrator’s job is to figure out Mauro C.’s actual accountability in said crimes, as the convict was recently released from prison and is now an asset of potential journalistic exploitation.

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<sup>93</sup> “Mi primer caso importante, el de la niña, me enseñó que todo es relativo: era imposible que ella hubiera matado a sus tíos, pero no podía ser de otro modo. Y era inocente aunque fuera culpable”

<sup>94</sup> “La trama de la novela policial se había vuelto decepcionante”

However, each interview conducted in the narrator's line of duty reveals different versions. Mauro C.'s niece, Paula C., declares her uncle murdered twenty or twenty five women; a journalist who originally investigated the crimes affirms it was actually nine; Mauro C.'s ex wife assures her husband is incapable of hurting a fly; Mauro C. himself, after offering his own testimony, states he killed ten ex-girlfriends. According to Emiliano Coello, "Each version adds, therefore, a degree of falsehood to that which occurred, because reality, on its own fragmentary and anarchic, does not operate with the imperatives of logic or of a rational system"<sup>95</sup>. The journalistic practice is therefore disassociated from any kind of realistic portrayal of events, and functions, rather, as a space where contending versions strengthen the possibility of polemic to which said practice aspires.

Issues of responsibility in criminal activities become secondary in *De vez en cuando la muerte*. What is emphasized is the public nature of any crime and any death. As the narrator asserts, "A dead person is a public asset. A boy that is born without a brain is a public asset. Hundreds of newspapers wouldn't exist if many things of that kind weren't public assets" (71)<sup>96</sup>. As a reporter, the narrator conceives of himself as the link between the private and public spheres of a crime. He is the witness *par excellence*, and as such his duty is simply to make visible that which is invisible to others. He ponders his professional standing, acknowledging that "Sometimes, in my

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<sup>95</sup> Todas las versiones añaden, por lo tanto, una cuota de mentira a lo ocurrido, porque la realidad, por sí misma fragmentaria y anárquica, no se aviene con los imperativos de la lógica o de un sistema racional.

<sup>96</sup> "Un muerto es un bien público. Un niño que nace sin cerebro es un bien público. No existirían cientos de periódicos si muchas cosas de este tipo no fueran bienes públicos"

frequent insomniac episodes, I would start thinking what it was that I was and what it was I should be. A journalist, in both cases. Someone who goes out on the street, sees what's going on there, and then tells it to someone that wants to know it" (153)<sup>97</sup>. The legitimacy of witness' accounts is in this way undermined by the value they acquire in a market of competing sensationalist narratives.

If *Piedras encantadas* presents the city itself as the condition of possibility for the construction of polyphonic, contending witness accounts, both *Los años marchitos* and *De vez en cuando la muerte* dismiss the particular circumstances which give rise to testimonial narratives. Taking a Machiavellian standpoint, these works conceive of the legitimacy allotted to testimonial texts solely in terms of their purported effect, which oftentimes serves the interests of those in power. This, in turn, problematizes the relationship between testimonial subjects and the communities to which they belong, something which can be particularly appreciated in the work of Castellanos Moya. In his case, testimonial subjects find themselves diametrically opposed to the collective bodies for which *testimonio* traditionally speaks. Therefore, the legitimacy of their accounts rests not on their site of enunciation, but rather on their site of reception. In this way, the conditions of privilege which often characterize the relationship between subject and transcriber are both highlighted and exacerbated.

The protagonist and narrator of Horacio Castellanos Moya's *El arma en el hombre* (2001) is a former member of the El Salvadorean elite forces. He has known as Robocop ever since his days in the Acahuapa platoon, a unit which is disbanded

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<sup>97</sup> "A veces, en mis frecuentes insomnios, me ponía a pensar en lo que yo era y en lo que debía ser. Un periodista, en ambos casos. Alguien que sale a la calle, mira lo que pasa allí y luego se lo cuenta a quien quiera saberlo"

following the end of the civil war. “The fact that a unit in my battalion participated in the execution of some Spanish Jesuit priests was also used to harass us,” Robocop explains, “But the High Command chose us for that operation precisely because we were the most efficient ones” (11)<sup>98</sup>. Robocop’s sour words draw a clear parallel between his unit and the Atlacatl battalion, responsible for the murder of progressive Jesuit priests at the Universidad Centroamericana on November 16<sup>th</sup>, 1989 (Wade, 126). He functions as a cypher for the failed transition of combatants into civil society following the signing of the peace accords. As the title of the novel makes clear, Robocop cannot be separated from the violence he practiced during the civil war; his first-person narrative reveals a man devoid of ethical qualms, concerned only with surviving and securing a livelihood, now that his family—the military—has effectively disowned him.

As the name makes clear, Robocop is a killing machine but, more tellingly, one used to following orders with little regard to moral implications. His account is that of a postwar combatant attempting to survive in a new context where alliances amongst different individuals no longer form along ideological lines. Now that former military and guerrilla members have established private criminal organizations, Robocop moves from one to the next frequently, offering his services to drug traffickers and mobsters independently of their creed. His nickname—along with the novel’s title—suggest Robocop is merely an instrument at the hands of his employers. Throughout the novel, he constantly struggles to find his footing in a world of shifting

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<sup>98</sup> “El hecho de que una unidad del batallón haya participado en la ejecución de unos curas jesuitas españoles también fue utilizado para acosarnos. Pero el Alto Mando nos escogió para esa operación precisamente porque éramos los más eficientes”

loyalties, hiding from detective Villalta, former guerrilla members, and supposed friends alike. *El arma en el hombre* plays with the conventions of the testimonial pact by presenting a silent interlocutor of questionable ethics (a narcotics officer who, the reader learns, is the recipient of Robocop's testimony), along with a narrative subject who speaks against all those who have suffered abuses from the military during the civil war.

Perhaps the most telling aspect of the novel is the protagonist's alleged secrecy and laconic nature, characteristics which are constantly undermined by his description of his past and present crimes. "I will not talk about my adventures in combat," he affirms early on, "I just want to make it clear that I'm not just like any other demobilized individual" (11)<sup>99</sup>. Of course, this secretive drive directly contradicts his unrelenting recounting of his story, and the ambivalence in his position as narrative subject is further complicated by the fact that "There were other similar interrogations, but they never got a word from me. I was prepared, from the very first combat missions, to resist in case I was captured by the enemy" (63)<sup>100</sup>. A sense of pride and misplaced loyalty seems to guide his actions as he moves between Guatemala and El Salvador and confides in the unknown recipient of his account. His secrecy remits, likewise, to the resistance offered by traditional testimonial subjects, although, as Beatriz Cortez states in "La verdad y otras ficciones: Visiones críticas sobre el testimonio centroamericano", there is a "dangerous parallelism between this text and

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<sup>99</sup> "No contaré mis aventuras en combate" / "nada más quiero dejar en claro que no soy un desmovilizado cualquiera"

<sup>100</sup> "Hubo otros interrogatorios parecidos, pero no me sacaron palabra. Yo estaba preparado, desde los primeros combates, para resistir en caso de caer en manos del enemigo"



testimonio” (2001)<sup>101</sup>. In a similar vein, Kokotovich notes that “this resemblance to the testimonial form only serves to highlight the distance between testimonio and these postwar novels” (“Neoliberalismo” 198)<sup>102</sup>. Certainly, the political tilt of Robocop’s discourse appears utterly at odds with those of traditional testimonial subjects. Robocop does not speak for a community (in fact, his individualistic outlook distances him from any kind of collective project), but he does offer a first-person account brought about by a situation of urgency. His supposed reticence is constantly put into question as the narrative unfolds, yet it is only at the end of the novel that his motives become clear. Robocop has been caught by American narcotics officers and, in essence, “The deal was this: I would tell them everything I knew and, in exchange, they would reconstruct me (new face, new identity) and turn me into an agent for special operations in Central America” (131)<sup>103</sup>. His transition from the position of witness to that of a law enforcement officer closes the circle and resignifies the value of that to which he has attested. His testimony, it turns out, has been provided in exchange for legal redemption, furthering the cycle of impunity and promoting U.S. interests in the region. In a disconcerting twist, the reader discovers he has been occupying the same position occupied by the narcotics agent listening to Robocop’s account, a device which establishes a kind of perverse complicity with the subject of the testimony.

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<sup>101</sup> “peligroso paralelismo entre este texto y el testimonio”

<sup>102</sup> “este parecido a la forma narrativa testimonial solo sirve para marcar la distancia entre el testimonio y estas novelas de posguerra”

<sup>103</sup> “El trato era éste: yo les contaba todo lo que sabía y, a cambio, ellos me reconstruirían (nueva cara, nueva identidad) y me convertirían en agente para operaciones especiales a disposición en Centroamérica”

This inversion of the common expectations associated with *testimonio* is carried out through the incorporation of hard-boiled conventions. The priority of toughness over reasoning, the ever-present violence, the corruption at all levels of society: the crimes in *El arma en el hombre* are produced by Robocop's careless actions, crimes which come to surpass his own control or understanding. He plots future crimes as he attempts to sort out those of the present. This is by no means, of course, a rigid superimposition of certain narrative techniques from the detective fiction genre<sup>104</sup>. Robocop has none of the integrity found in a Marlowe or Sam Spade, and is only motivated by a kind of highly developed survival instinct. He moves through the city with ease, transitioning in between dive bars, brothels, and rundown motels. More importantly, however, Robocop's story truly embodies the cyclical nature of the armed conflict. As he asserts, "Saúl told me he was working with Mayor Linares –who had also been my boss in the battalion–, they carried out special operations, secret, organically detached from the institution, but always in the struggle" (30)<sup>105</sup>. Despite ending up as a witness himself, Robocop leaves no witnesses behind (102), and is entrusted with perpetuating the power of those which traditional *testimonios* recognized as the perpetrators of human rights atrocities.

At this point it is worth calling attention to an important shift that occurs in the position of the witness once *testimonio* and detective fiction conventions are adopted by contemporary Central American narrative. As evidenced in *Los años marchitos*,

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<sup>104</sup> As Castellanos Moya explained in an interview conducted by Doris Wieser in 2010, "Yo no me considero un escritor de novela negra. Soy un escritor que, más bien, ocupa elementos de la novela negra para una obra menos clasificable en términos de género".

<sup>105</sup> "Saúl me contó que estaba trabajando con el mayor Linares –quien también había sido mi jefe en el batallón–, realizaban operaciones especiales, secretas, desvinculados orgánicamente de la institución, pero siempre en la lucha".

*Piedras encantadas*, and particularly *El arma en el hombre*, the subject of enunciation ceases to be an “informant”, as conceived by Joanna Bartow, and becomes an “informant,” understood as a collaborator. This shift, of course, does not only imply a particular ethical stance on behalf of these characters, but also insinuates a new kind of agency for those who supply testimony. There is nothing commendable in the process by which these witnesses become informants—in fact, they do so for monetary and often selfish, or self-preserving, reasons—but it does signal an awareness of the specific value of their accounts. Particularly, the fact that the value of an informant’s report depends on the corresponding addressee implies a reconfiguration of the negotiations by which confessions, and witness narratives, are constructed.

It is certainly well worth establishing a dialogue between *El arma en el hombre* and *The She-Devil in the Mirror*, published by Castellanos Moya in 2000<sup>106</sup>. Beyond the intertextual connections both novels share—the fact that Robocop is accused of committing the central murder in *The She-Devil in the Mirror*, or the presence of reporter Rita Mena in both texts—these novels draw attention to the central role that interlocutors hold in the construction of witness accounts. While both works portray individualistic narrative subjects with distinctly powerful voices, their stories’ legitimacy rests on the position of privilege occupied by their addressees.

*The She-Devil in the Mirror* consists of Laura Rivera’s account following the murder of Olga María, her best friend and fellow socialite. “How could such a tragedy have happened, my dear?” (7) the reader first hears in the opening line. *Hearing* is indeed an appropriate way to describe how the reader confronts this text, as Laura’s

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<sup>106</sup> Quotes and references regarding *La diablo en el espejo* are taken from *The She-Devil in the Mirror*, as the novel was translated by Katherine Silver.

rambling is infused with all the ticks and turns of phrase of an upper class Salvadorean jetsetter. The oral quality of traditional testimonial narrative is certainly present in her fast-paced rant, albeit continuously reminding the reader of the narrator's elite, upper-class position. The second-person point-of-view addresses an unknown interlocutor throughout the novel, as Laura reveals Olga María's hidden secrets and speculates on the possible reasons for her murder. Oftentimes, said conjectures are nothing more than excuses for Laura to gossip; the unknown interlocutor seems keen on learning about the skeletons in Olga María's closet or, at least, this is what Laura's rant appears to imply. As such, this silent presence conditions Laura's version from the start. The narrator's determination to hide valuable information from police officers conducting the investigation draws further attention to her interlocutor's position of privilege.

The novel, selected as a finalist for the Rómulo Gallegos Prize in 2001, depicts a haughty protagonist who looks down upon anyone below her social standing. In this regard, Laura is diametrically opposed to traditional testimonial subjects. This is revealed in her manner of speaking along, as well as in her explicitly racist and classist remarks. Remarking nostalgically on a past when hired help was part of a kind of feudal arrangement, and was not allowed to look for work elsewhere, she states that it "was a different world: servants used to be a part of the family" (34). However, there are certainly common elements between this novel and testimonial texts. The monologic, oral account offered by Laura to a third party remits to testimonial narratives bestowed unto a transcriber. Her account progressively gathers speed as Robocop, the alleged murderer of Olga María, appears to be following her with dark intentions as well. There is certainly a sense of urgency in her fast-moving outbursts

although, of course, her privileged position forecloses any attempt at eliciting greater social justice.

The great unknown in *The She-Devil in the Mirror* is the identity of Laura's interlocutor. To whom is she speaking? Why is it that, in speaking to her unknown friend, Laura seems to be speaking to the reader as well? Is her friend the transcriber of Laura's account, and if so, what kind of authority or legitimacy does she bring to the text? A certain intimacy, indeed a sense of trust, is established between Laura and her addressee. Constantly referring to her interlocutor as "my dear", it is clear that they share a close relationship, one which allows Laura to divulge all kinds of private information. Current and past love affairs, criminal activities carried out by members of the elite, all sorts of treacherous dealings: the list of secrets is endless and disquieting, particularly as Laura attempts to hide such secrets from the police. As the novel progresses, Laura paradoxically builds a strong sense of complicity with the reader and interlocutor, for both are privy to her confidential musings. "But now the place is really full, my dear", Laura says during her best friend's wake, "let's go say hello to people, we don't want anybody to think badly of us, as if we came to Olga María's wake just to gossip" (40). Curiously, it is this gossip—these deviations from issues dealing directly with the crime—which endow Laura's account with a certain legitimacy. She confides in her interlocutor and simultaneously in the reader. *The She-Devil in the Mirror* reveals the degree to which the account's alleged veracity depends on distinct rhetorical strategies.

As the novel approaches the end, the reader learns that Laura "had a nervous breakdown because of all the stress of Olga María's murder and Robocop's escape"

(181). It turns out that Laura has been speaking to herself the entire time or, more accurately, to a conjured up version of Olga María. Paradoxically, by suffering from a mental ailment, Laura's account appears to bear greater veracity. She is, in the end, speaking to herself, and her fear of imminent death forces her to consider all hypotheses, all possible versions, without leaving out any details. The game here is twofold: on one hand, the testimonial subject is, in the end, a raving lunatic, one who sets herself apart from any possibility of solidarity. On the other hand, the reader learns that solidarity was never truly possible, that the identification between testimonial subject and interlocutor was always absolute—an irreducible empathy, so to speak. Joanna Bartow states that each participant in the testimonial process “occupies shifting discursive locations that separate or overlap (...) while the boundary between subject and transcriber remains intact as it must to in fact justify taking down the testimony of someone quite different” (Bartow 34). If this difference acts as a legitimizing factor, *The She-Devil in the Mirror* reveals testimonio's potential ventriloquism at a kind of degree zero. The illusion of a testimonial account where intimacy is established—an intimacy which endows the spoken word with the appearance of truthfulness—is ultimately a textual effect which obscures the particular subject positions held by both speaker and interlocutor.

Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *Cárcel de árboles* (1991) presents a very different kind of witness account. The novel, which draws from the conventions of detective fiction, *testimonio*, and science fiction, describes the life of prisoners in a concentration camp located in the northern jungle of Guatemala. Although isolated from civilization, it is clear the camp is run by the military, and that most of its

prisoners are there for political reasons. A gruesome experiment led by Dr. Pelcari eliminates, through diverse forms of physical and psychological trauma, prisoners' ability to speak and communicate with one other. All have had their tongues cut out, and are tied to a tree at the night and made to work in the jungle during the day.

Without language, these individuals also lose also their ability to think, given that they can't interpret or conceive of the world around them through any kind of sign system.

There is an evident metaphor at work, which links the prisoners' incapacity to speak and think to the impact the military regime has had on the civilian population at large: they are prisoners, reduced to grunting beings at the mercy of those who control them.

The novel begins with the discovery of a man suffering on the riverbed of an unpopulated region in the south of Belize. He is brought to Dr. William Adie, who notices the man is scarred, beaten, and is clutching a journal in his hands. The mystery of this dying man slowly unravels as Dr. Adie begins to read his journal, a testimony describing the ordeals suffered at the prisoner camp. He learns that while being held captive, the prisoner found the journal and a pencil among the wreckage of an airplane in the middle of the jungle. It was thanks to this discovery that the prisoner started experimenting with the pencil, finally realizing that he could write on the journal's pages. It is writing which allows the prisoner to think: despite lacking oral language and the ability to think in the categories of language, the act of writing brings about the thoughts it spells out. The reader learns that "There hasn't been a process, a chronological progression. The instant in which my hand began forming words I

began to understand” (16)<sup>107</sup>. Narrative –affording events a chronological order– is thus directly linked to the process of renewed comprehension; in fact, the construction of an identity takes place as the words on the page allow the prisoner to conceive of himself and his surroundings through language. The novel underscores the truly performative nature of written language: it brings about, and creates, the world to which it refers. The production of the text produces understanding in the prisoner, a newly found worldview. Dr. Adie, for his part, is able to begin unraveling the mystery through the reading process.

The journal found by Dr. Adie functions as a *testimonio*. Not only does it include the words of a desperate man who has been found in a life-or-death situation; the text gives speech to the literally speechless. The prisoners are held in the camp and controlled through a loudspeaker system; the sounds emitted by the loudspeakers entrance the captives and force them to obey orders. They have been dispossessed of the word, and also of thoughts, and it is the writing of the journal that comes to interrupt the all-powerful, homogenizing force of these sounds. “Yu”, as the protagonist comes to be known (he can only articulate the sound “yu”), is able to transcend this collective murmur and leave record of the plight of himself and his fellow prisoners. Writing becomes a productive act, a world-making act, but also that which allows both prisoners and readers later on to become aware of the atrocities taking place just miles away from the place where the journal is found.

More importantly, however, *Cárcel de árboles* confronts the dichotomy that pits writing against orality, and challenges the phonocentric drive that endows the

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<sup>107</sup> “No ha habido un proceso, una progresión en el tiempo. El instante en que mi mano comenzó a formar palabras yo comencé a comprender”



spoken word with a distinct original value (Marcone, 45), one which can allegedly be found in testimonial texts. Writing, in this novel, antecedes thinking or, in any case, provides the conditions of possibility for carrying out thoughts. It is a creative endeavor, one which is capable of accessing that which the spoken word obscures. Whereas the sounds emitted by the prisoners reinforce their subjugation, forcing them to follow the commands of a higher order, writing interrupts the process and provides clues to the kinds of mechanisms that allow certain words to be spoken. There is thus a kind of Foucauldian awakening that takes place which is enabled through the written word.

The dying man commits suicide at the end of the novel, before Dr. Adie can talk to him about the contents the journal. However, a second prisoner shows up on the riverbed shortly after. Although dead, the discovery of his body allows a local newspaper to publish three articles on the subject of medicine signed by the doctor, such that Dr. Pelcari receives orders from the government to shut down the camp. The liberating force of the testimonial text functions at two levels: it literally allows the prisoners to escape by restoring their rational capacity and, more importantly, it sheds light on the abuse to which many more are subjected to. These are, of course, limited effects, as Dr. Pelcari is flown from the base to a new location where she will likely be able to continue with her experiments, and the two prisoners who glimpsed the possibility of escape were never able to survive. Writing did, however, offer the possibility of a new kind of awareness, one that overruled the monotonous and controlling sounds produced by those in power.

The works discussed in this chapter certainly draw from the hard-boiled tradition in their portrayal of corrupt societies with failing institutions, and in their focus on detectives both mentally and physically immersed in their investigation. The lack of solutions, however, along with the epistemological questions arising from the play between fictional and non-literary texts, also draw them close to an anti-detective sensibility. Basing his study on approaches to literary evolution espoused by Russian formalists, Stefano Tani asserts that a pendular movement affected the development of detective fiction in the 1940s, producing novels that reacted against the primacy of action (and lack of mystery) epitomized by hard-boiled works. This clear-cut, ‘given’ solution was “the hard-boiled formula against which the anti-detective novel shaped itself, reacting by its opposite constructive principle, that is, the suspension of the solution” (Tani 37). Anti-detective novels without a solution were to follow the formulaic developments of the hard-boiled, mimicking its workings in order to set up expectations undermined by an ambiguous or nonexistent resolution (Tani 41). These works questioned the detective’s ability to solve the crime at hand, but also offered broader inquiries into the nature of truth, knowledge, and notions of right and wrong.

The ambiguity regarding the authority of witnesses accounts, the contending truths which these works pit against each other, the questionable legitimacy of the channels through which certain facts achieve a status of truthfulness, all endow these detective quests with the narrative tension characteristic of the genre. Furthermore, these texts interrogate *testimonio*’s problematic assumptions, focusing, in particular, on the frail and often one-dimensional ground on which the notion of the witness is founded, as well as on the literary mechanisms inherent to all testimonial texts. The

legitimacy of witness accounts –something central to *testimonio*, but also to the investigations present in detective novels– is no longer determined by the place and authority of the testimonial subject. Rather, it is governed by the position occupied by the facilitator and consumer of the testimonial text itself. As Doris Sommer notes while addressing subaltern studies’ well-known question, “To ask if the subaltern can speak, as Gayatri Spivak has asked, misses a related point. The pertinent question is whether the other party can listen. Privilege gets in the way of hearing even a direct address” (Sommer 20). The texts of Menjívar Ochoa, Castellanos Moya, and Rey Rosa show that the act of hearing cannot be dissociated from the power relations which are always already at work between testimonial subject and their interlocutors. Therefore, the process of investigation should perhaps be directed at the position of privilege, a determinant factor regarding the legitimacy of the witness account. These texts do not, in the end, ask us to question the testimonies granted by witnesses. Rather, they ask that we look at the conditions that allow for the production and distribution of those accounts.

## CHAPTER THREE

### FICTIONS OF THE ARCHIVE

The archive, in its multiple manifestations, has a central role in the recent works of Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Rafael Menjívar Ochoa, and Horacio Castellanos Moya. As depository of information, as classificatory system, or as set of rules for particular discursive practices, the archive exerts a gravitational pull on the current literary concerns of these three authors. This could be ascribed, on one hand, to particular historical circumstances in the region. Following the end of the civil wars, the signing of the Peace Accords in El Salvador and Guatemala—in 1992 and 1996 respectively— included mandates to investigate human rights abuses committed during the recent past and to formulate recommendations to avoid such abuses in the future. The *Comisión de la Verdad*, in El Salvador, and the *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*, in Guatemala<sup>108</sup>, had the task of uncovering crimes perpetrated during the internal conflicts, as well as issuing reports which were to include different kinds of testimonies and expert analyses. These documents, in turn, complemented other archives of historical value, particularly as they dealt with the recent history of state-sponsored violence: subaltern and leftist intellectuals' *testimonios*, declassified CIA reports, police archives, and records of legal proceedings.

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<sup>108</sup>The report of Salvadorean *Comisión de la Verdad*, for example, states that "The Commission shall have the task of investigating serious acts of violence that have occurred since 1980 and whose impact on society urgently demands that the public should know the truth" (11).

The archive, however, also possesses a kind of primordial allure which goes beyond its power to document. As Michael Sheringham states in “Memory and the archive in contemporary life-writing,” “part of the figural power of the archive springs from its association with what the social body often desires to repress or keep hidden” (48). The archive, in this manner, would seem to beckon the intervention of a literary apparatus capable of accessing that which trauma conceals. Each of the works analyzed in this chapter therefore functions as a postdictatorial text “par excellence in that it accepts the inheritance of the trauma and is written as an attempt to come to terms with that trauma” (Avelar 20). Nevertheless, unveiling the trauma which inhabits the archive constitutes a difficult project. After all, the archive is a polysemic term, fraught with numerous semantic layers and equally numerous theoretical difficulties. As Rebecca Comay asserts in *Lost in the Archives*:

The archive, whose very name evokes the language of origins and the promise of mastery—in its double etymology *arché* famously signifies both “command” and “origin”—confounds every beginning and every rule. If the aporia of the “heap” turns out, in every case, to be the straw that breaks the camel’s back—the camel in this case being the dream of narrative consistency, and thus the very possibility of history-writing as a sequential temporal and logical ordering (before and after, cause and effect)—this leads us to the startling conclusion that the archive, condition of possibility of remembrance, exceeds and confounds the time of history. The collection, source and reservoir of recollection, is itself suspended in the immemorial (14).

At stake here is the capacity of narrative to engage with the archive and, furthermore, the manner in which an archive constitutes itself as such: to follow Comay’s reference to Samue Becketts’ *Endgame*, how many grains of sand are necessary to make a heap or, more to the point, what distinguishes an archive from a given accumulation of

documents?<sup>109</sup> There is an arbitrary nature to any kind of classification and to the practice of endowing any such classified material with the ability to speak for the past. The works discussed in this chapter confront that difficulty through different approaches. In order to engage with these diverse archives—to undertake a narrative based on the material housed within them—these texts themselves adopt an archival logic. As such, they create literary machines capable of mimicking and articulating the archive’s classificatory process and its distributional operations, consequently laying bare the arbitrariness, violence, or grab-bag approach that underlie these archives in the first place.

Each of the texts by these three Central American authors tackle the archive in very distinct manners. *El material humano* (2009), by Rodrigo Rey Rosa, renounces the laws of its own narrative construction and adopts those of the Police Archive, as the narrator grapples with documents and traces found within it in order to disclose the arbitrary nature of the repressive system at its foundation. In turn, it reveals the fictive underpinnings upon which the archive’s legitimacy rests. *Tiempos de locura* (2006), a work of nonfiction by Rafael Menjívar Ochoa, adopts the *crónica* genre—a multifarious, eclectic “platypus” genre, as shall be further discussed—in order to narrate pivotal events in Salvadorean history between 1979 and 1981. Despite dealing with substantial archival documentation, it adopts a fast-paced, thriller-like narrative to do justice to the suspense and urgency which the archival material hints at yet fails

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<sup>109</sup> Clov’s famous line reads: “Grain upon gran, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there’s a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap”

to provide. *Insensatez* (2004), by Horacio Castellanos Moya<sup>110</sup>, gives voice to the testimonies found in an archive invested with recovering accounts of the victims of the civil war. In particular, it draws attention to the poetic dimension of these texts. Concomitantly, it posits the performative potential as well as the suspect politics of representation entailed in an esthetic appreciation of such testimonial fragments.

A marginal form conceived of as a challenge to hegemonic discourse, *testimonio* appeared, in its origins, to slip through the cracks of that which Michel Foucault refers to as the Archive –not the depository of ossified forms of knowledge, but rather the systems of enunciation by which discursive regularities and practices come to be legitimized and reproduced. As a counterhegemonic form of discourse, *testimonio* seemed to avoid the circuits in which canonical texts—that is, texts which were legitimized by a series of institutions and readerships—circulated and were consumed. Now, several decades after *testimonio*'s marginal status has been challenged, it would be difficult to make such a case<sup>111</sup>. The analysis of *El material humano* does not deal directly with *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; rather, it assumes some of those ideas as outlined in González Echeverría's *Myth and Archive*, focusing on the relationship between the Latin American novel's "link of its own writing with the power that makes it possible" (32), and the manner in which such a "novel endows the negativity of the Archive, the proscription of the Archive with a phantasmagoric form of being, embodying only, particularly in the modern period, the Archive's very power to differentiate" (34). In *Tiempos de locura*, the *crónica*'s hybrid form allows it

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<sup>110</sup> Quotes and references regarding *Insensatez* are taken from *Senselessness*, the translation of the novel by Katherine Silver.

<sup>111</sup> *Testimonio*'s inclusion in the "Western Civilization" undergraduate requirement at Stanford University illustrates this point quite well.

to incorporate the diverse discourses involved in the reconstruction of a key period in the Salvadorean civil war. This is particularly the case as Rafael Menjívar Ochoa drew from his background as a journalist and detective fiction writer to create an agile and rigorously investigated account. In Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness*, Idelber Avelar's *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (2001) provides an insightful and relevant analysis of the role of allegory and the working-through of mourning in postdictatorial novels. Of particular importance to this novel are the implications of literary, rather than explicitly political, readings of testimonial texts.

Given the diverse conceptualizations the archive has been subjected to in the three works here discussed, and the multiform manifestations it takes on, this chapter does not depend exclusively on any single theoretical approach. Rather, it draws from different conceptual frameworks, as it attempts read archival texts through the archival logic at work in them.

The Guatemalan civil war foregrounds *El material humano*. The novel deals with the discovery, in 2005, of an extensive Police Archive. Secret records dating back more than a century can be used to prove that many *desaparecidos* had been taken into police custody at moments when dictatorial governments were ruling the country. The roots of the Police Archive are inextricably linked with the creation of the Policía Nacional, a national security apparatus founded by the liberal government of Justo Rufino Barrios in 1872. Said institution continued to function until the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, when it was disbanded and replaced by the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC). The Police Archive, in turn, was created in 1882, ten years after the



establishment of the Policía Nacional. Containing more than eighty million documents, when discovered this archive provided invaluable information about the operations of the state security forces, particularly during the thirty-six year civil war that assailed the country in the latter half of the XX century. Moreover, the existence of the Police Archive was denied by the democratic government following the end of the war, even after (or, most likely, because of) the United Nations and Catholic Church's request for state documents referring back to the internal conflict ("Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional"). In this way, the postwar Archive embodied the negation inherent to its own operations, the proscriptive element which is found "at the beginning of the law" and of the archive (González Echeverría 33).

A fragmented first person narrative follows the investigation conducted by the main character in *El material humano*, a writer fashioned after Rey Rosa himself. Said character is allowed to join the team of researchers in charge of recovering and organizing the millions of documents salvaged. After securing an interview with the director of the recovery project, the writer is provided with access to a particular section of the Archive: the "Gabinete de Identificación," one of the few divisions which has been found nearly intact.

It is never quite clear if the narrator's findings in the Archive are a product of chance, anonymous help, or of a system which reveals only that which it wishes to reveal. The shadows of the structures of power involved in the systematic violence of the past loom high and large over La Isla, as the site of the Archive comes to be publicly known. The narrator's blind wandering therefore signals the limited hopes placed on a very literally blind Justice, despite the hordes of legally valuable

information contained within those damp rooms. Furthermore, it mirrors the manner in which the Police Archives themselves were discovered. As the Introduction explains, on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2005, a fire broke out in an outer area of Guatemala City near an old munitions dump belonging to the military. With neighboring buildings in danger, the Human Rights Office sent a team of investigators to assess the potential perils that remained. It was then that one of the inspectors came across an old army hospital which was said to have functioned as a torture center during the years of the civil war. Inside, he found room after room filled with documents, stacked as high as the ceilings. Edilberto Cifuentes Medina, the historian heading the team, immediately realized the significance of the find. As the Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala ascertained, one of the buildings revealed

documents which were practically exposed to the elements, and a crust had even formed, due to the rain, on the exterior of a volcano of documents, protecting what was left inside, 230,000 personal identification cards which were rescued: they contained data which had been solicited for identification cards, driving licenses, as well as postmortem tags and files of petty and political crimes (“Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional”)<sup>112</sup>

This volcano housed the documents that were part of the Gabinete de Identificación. The dormant volcano would provide researchers with the “material humano” used by Rey Rosa for his novel. Further investigation revealed that both the first and second floors of the building were filled with similar papers. The findings were later explained by the fact that with the signing of the Peace Accords and the resulting

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<sup>112</sup> “documentos que estaban casi en la intemperie, incluso se había hecho una costra en el exterior de un volcán conformado por ellos a causa de la lluvia, pero dentro de esa costra que protegió lo que estaba en el centro se rescataron 230,000 fichas de identificación personal: con datos solicitados para fichas de cédula de vecindad, licencia de conducir, fichas postmortem, delitos comunes y políticos” (*Note: Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own*).

dissolution of the National Police, the archives housed in the former Palacio de la Policía had been hastily moved to the place where they were later found.

The narrator's blind wandering through these documents shows the chaos in which such information finds itself, and also the limited extent to which the allegedly public data is allowed to see the light of day. It is not for any reason that "In the Archive they had a nickname for me: *«the Matrix»* (...) «They allow you to see only what they want you to see, right? –B+ told me one day– Then, what were you expecting?»" (143)<sup>113</sup>. He is forced to wander through a labyrinth of assorted texts, picking up bits and pieces of information that lead to as many places as they lead nowhere. The structure of the novel mimics the dynamic at work in the investigation of the Police Archive: the reader traverses a text with no clear path, stumbling across quotes and fragments that constitute the novel's eclectic cultural archive. Such textual traces are often on their own, erupting onto the page without previous warning. The narrator himself resists the temptation to efface the discontinuities which permeate the text, as if keenly aware that lending a cohesive narrative structure to his account would disguise the Archive's operations of arbitrary violence.

Perhaps the first feature to strike the reader of *El material humano* is its epigraph, which states that "Even though it doesn't seem like it, even though it doesn't want to seem like it, this is a work of fiction"<sup>114</sup>. The reader is faced with a narrative pact that defies the novel's traditional mimetic enterprise, particularly given that the events and situations described in the text call for an identification with a verifiable

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<sup>113</sup> "En el Archivo tienen un apodo para mí: *«el Matrix»* (...) «Te dejan ver sólo lo que quieren que veás, ¿no? –me dijo un día B+– ¿Entonces, qué podés esperar?»"

<sup>114</sup> "Aunque no lo parezca, aunque no quiera parecerlo, ésta es una obra de ficción".

reality. In essence, what this novel advocates is a paradoxical suspension of belief. However, given the multiple narrative approaches and the extraliterary textual traces present in the novel, the reader's exile to the land of fiction is always a tenuous one. Should the essay fragments be read as fictional accounts? Are the testimonies included as part of the investigation meant to be considered false? In fact, should fiction itself be equated to a notion of falsehood, or should it simply be understood as challenging state fictions upheld by the practices embodied by the Archive? Moreover, the transcription of the identity cards found in the "Gabinete de Identificación" produces the illusion of a truly indexical reality on display –a reference to reality, as explained previously, to which all testimonial texts aspire. As such, the epigraph of *El material humano* inverts precisely the referential pretensions of *testimonio*. Elzbieta Sklodowska has shown that *testimonio*'s prologues and paratexts reveal that their "fundamental contradiction lies in the very same testimonial contract: it is a variant of the novelistic contract which, in turn, is a simulacrum which serves to hide the fictional identity of the novel"<sup>115</sup> (Sklodowska, *Testimonio hispanoamericano* 97). Rey Rosa's novel renounces this pretension from the start, presenting texts and scenarios which resist the fictional status to which it simultaneously advocates by way of its epigraph. The fact that the novel closes with a "Nota" which appears to contradict the initial claim further muddles the text's allegedly fictional status: "Some characters asked to be given a new name,"<sup>116</sup> it reads. It would thus seem that something has changed in the Matrix, to follow the previous analogy. In other words,

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<sup>115</sup> "contradicción fundamental radica en el mismo contrato testimonial: es una variante del contrato novelístico que, a su vez, es un simulacro que sirve para disfrazar la identidad ficcional de la novela"

<sup>116</sup> "Algunos personajes pidieron ser rebautizados".

something has been adjusted between the beginning and the end of *El material humano* –in the path traversed by the reader as he or she follows the narrator through the archive. In this manner, the archive and its fragmented ordering of experience function as a discursive mechanism that distorts the prerogatives narrative ascribes to its own construction, causing an explicitly fictional text to renounce the fictional condition it established for itself to begin with.

The novel therefore finds itself torn between two competing but non-exclusive drives: the desire to engage with and attest to an indexical, extraliterary reality of violence and repression and, on the other hand, a novelistic ambition which, according to the narrator, propels him into the project in the first place (Rey Rosa 14). The varied references to different literary texts blur the lines between fact and fiction. This is a tactic enacted throughout the novel, and placing “emphasis on the literariness of the search, on its background and context, is one of the main strategies Rey Rosa uses to completely erase or underscore the great permeability of the border between reality and fiction” (Jastrzebska 24)<sup>117</sup>. Perhaps, insight on how to read *El material humano* can be found within the novel itself. After all, the narrator himself asserts that “All texts are ambiguous,” adding, in his state of vigil, a rare statement of utter conviction: “I believe it” (74)<sup>118</sup>. If the epigraph warns us that this is a fictional text, then perhaps the reader should take such words with a grain of salt. References to the manipulation of historical records and to the malleability of political discourse (embodied in the character of Fouché, to be discussed further), would not only hint at the potential

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<sup>117</sup> “énfasis en la literariedad de su pesquisa, de su trasfondo y su contexto, es una de las principales estrategias que usa Rey Rosa para borrar por completo o subrayar la gran permeabilidad de la frontera entre realidad y ficción”.

<sup>118</sup> “Todo texto es ambiguo” / “Lo creo”

ambiguity and falsehood of particular discursive practices, but also at the downright prevarication which underlies official discourse, that which is excluded from, and excludes, the literary realm. In other words, the novel itself systematically deconstructs its own epigraph –that proscriptive element which brackets the novel and binds the reader to a *lawful* interpretation of the text.

The character’s desire to write about the Police Archive –also known as “La Isla” – is triggered by his very first visit. He asserts that “the circumstances and the environment of the Archive of La Isla had begun to seem novelesque, and perhaps even capable of being turned into a novel. A kind of *microchaos* whose account would serve as melody for the singular macabre dance of our previous century” (14)<sup>119</sup>. The Archive thus comes to function synecdochally in relation to Guatemala’s past violence; it serves as a kind of key capable of unlocking the house of terror erected by state-sponsored violence. Two challenges, however, are implied in this project. On one hand, the chaotic nature of the Archive constitutes it as an object of problematic narration. For how can one make sense of an archive that is in ruins and has lost all semblance of order and logic? After all, an archive lacking these attributes would find its very condition as an archive challenged, making such an endeavor impossible a priori. Secondly, as a depository of fragmented experiences, La Isla resists the ordering which narrative affords. The Archive’s reliance on non-narrative sources of information –photographs, identity cards, fingerprints– proves problematic when

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<sup>119</sup> “las circunstancias y el ambiente del Archivo de La Isla habían comenzado a parecerme novelescos, y acaso aun novelables. Una especie de *microcaos* cuya relación podría servir de coda para la singular danza macabra de nuestro último siglo”

translating the “material humano” that enters the archive into the ‘material humano’ on which fiction relies.

*El material humano*’s formal layout is perhaps one of its most distinct features. The novel is divided among four “Cuadernos” and four “Libretas”, some of which include additional sections of “Hojas adjuntas”. This organization obeys no clear or explicit guiding principle; perhaps the only conspicuously narrative construction can be found in the diary entries and their respective chronological ordering, even if the sequence of dates and the events described follow loose causal connections. Moreover, an array of literary and philosophical quotes, as well as excerpts from interviews and conversations, dream sequences, travelogues, and traces of the archive—in the form of prisoner identity cards, police reports, and memorandums—constitute the flesh of the text’s unorthodox structure. The novel progressively becomes a sort of chamber filled with resonances, a site of shadows and whispers which resist identification. Many of the chosen quotes and excerpts are displayed within the gaps of the fragmentary narrative, dislocated from any fixed context of reference. In this sense, the novel displays a structural similarity to other works of Rey Rosa’s prose—a prose which, according to Roberto Bolaño, resembles “a huge cold chamber where words jump out, alive, reborn” (141)<sup>120</sup>.

The apparent arbitrariness of *El material humano*’s organization does nevertheless signal a thematic concern which is anything but arbitrary. The novel opposes its own singular formal logic—a logic of dispersion—to the systematic classificatory and distributional logic of the Police Archive. Shortly after displaying a

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<sup>120</sup> “una enorme cámara frigorífica donde las palabras saltan, vivas, renacidas”

dry series of prisoner identity cards in “Segunda libreta: pasta negra”, the narrator states that:

It wouldn't be prudent to conclude anything taking as foundation the chaotic and whimsical numbering of a series of police cards which resisted time and the elements just by chance; the number of those which were lost or became hummus is undoubtedly important. But the series shows the arbitrary and often perverse nature of our typical and original justice system, which established the foundations for the generalized violence which was unleashed in the country in the eighties and whose consequences we live today. (36)<sup>121</sup>

According to Michel Foucault, systems of dispersion underlie all discursive formations (37). In other words, the apparent unity of discourse is in fact characterized by discontinuities; any discursive analysis should therefore be concerned with uncovering the dispersion of elements which is constitutive of all discursive regularities. Using Foucault's understanding of the dispersive quality of the archive, González Echeverría asserts that the “novel-Archive unleashes a ghostly procession of figures of negation, inhabitants of the fissures and cracks which hover around the covenant of writing and the law” (34). *El material humano* conjures up precisely those spectral figures, by assuming the gaps and points of rupture that the Police Archive hides within its apparently seamless classificatory and distributional logic. As the mutilated remnant of its original, the recently discovered Archive seems to undermine the systematic logic underpinning its operation. Said systematic logic is

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<sup>121</sup> “No sería prudente concluir nada tomando como base la enumeración caótica y caprichosa de una serie de fichas policíacas que resistieron al tiempo y la intemperie sólo por azar; el número de las que se perdieron o se convirtieron en humus es sin duda importante. Pero la serie muestra la índole arbitraria y muchas veces perversa de nuestro típico y original sistema de justicia, que sentó las bases para la violencia generalizada que se desencadenó en el país en los años ochenta y cuyas secuelas vivimos todavía.”



embodied in the scientific method by which the Archive legitimizes its functions, in particular as evidenced in the Gabinete de Identificación.

*El material humano* sets loose the ghosts confined to the Archive by enacting the Archive's constitutive irregularities, and in doing so expose the arbitrary nature of a repressive system which the Archive veils under the semblance of method. By renouncing the laws of narrative construction, by contesting its own persistent claims to notions of veracity, by presenting the utterly singular experiences which are leveled within the categories of penal indictment at work in the Archive, Rey Rosa's novel in turn reveals the fictive underpinnings upon which the Archive's legitimacy rests.

The realm of literature, however, does not emerge unscathed from its contention with the law of the Archive. In fact, the novel's awareness of the relationship between literature and power, of the "covenant of writing and the law", is crystallized in its depiction of Miguel Ángel Asturias, totem figure of Guatemalan literature. The author of *Hombres de maíz* is cited, paradigmatically, in one of his tirades against the local indigenous populations, when "the future Nobel prize winner wrote: *to be faithful to the truth, the indian's psyche brings together signs of undoubted degeneration; the indian is fanatical, a drug addict and cruel. Or: That which is done with other animal species should be done with the indian, as with bovine cattle, when they exhibit symptoms of degeneration*" (114)<sup>122</sup>. The narrator states that he prefers to recall one of Asturias' contemporaries, an anonymous writer who resisted falling into the popular eugenic discourse of the times: "I can't manage to

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<sup>122</sup> "el futuro premio Nobel escribía: *En rigor de verdad, el indio psíquicamente reúne signos indudables de degeneración; es fanático, toxicómano y cruel. O: Hágase con el indio lo que con otras especies animales, como el ganado vacuno, cuando presentan síntomas de degeneración*"

remember him and, however, he existed, that contemporary, writer or historian *unjustly forgotten*” (75)<sup>123</sup>. The silenced history enclosed in the Police Archive therefore remits to the silenced history of all cultural archives.

“Archives keep the secrets of the state,” González Echeverría writes, “and novels keep the secrets of culture, and the secret of those secrets” (33). As incarnation of the law in the realm of literature, the literary canon is exposed in its inextricable link with power. In a conversation held outside La Isla, the narrator is presented with a photograph which shows the baptism of “Miguel Angel Asturias’ older son, Rodrigo, future head of the Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA) and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG). He’s baptized by Monsignor Rossell y Arellano, who years later would be archbishop of Guatemala. The godfather is Ydígoras Fuentes, no more, no less” (146)<sup>124</sup>. Rossell y Arellano was a fervent anticommunist who, as Archbishop, came to play a central role in the CIA orchestrated *coup d’état* against Jacobo Árbenz, the last democratically elected president before the beginning, in 1954, of an era of dictatorships. Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes, for his part, ruled the military government in power from 1958 to 1963, and launched the first counterinsurgency campaign, effectively starting off the thirty-six year long civil war. Ironically, perhaps, Rodrigo Asturias came to adopt Gaspar Ilom as his *nom de guerre*—the name of the mythical hero in Miguel Ángel Asturias’ *Hombres de maíz* who fought against the tyranny of despotic overlords. The

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<sup>123</sup> “No logro recordarlo, y sin embargo existió, ese contemporáneo, escritor o historiador *injustamente olvidado*”.

<sup>124</sup> “el hijo mayor de Miguel Ángel Asturias, Rodrigo, futuro jefe de la Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA) y la Unión Revolucionaria Guatemalteca (URNG). Lo bautiza monseñor Rossell y Arellano, que unos años más tarde sería arzobispo de Guatemala. El padrino es Ydígoras Fuentes, ni más ni menos”

photograph of the baptism reveals in turn the link between the law of the state and the law of literature, and it is this relationship which *El material humano* explores.

As he attempts to follow the thread of a story that seems to escape him, the narrator asks himself “what kind of Minotaur can be found in a labyrinth like this one. Maybe it’s a trait of hereditary thought to believe that every labyrinth has its Minotaur. If this one didn’t have it, I might be tempted to invent it” (56)<sup>125</sup>. The book is peppered with mentions of Borges, Ariadne, and the Minotaur. These are by no means random references, as the investigation of the narrator resembles the quests of those who enter Daedalus’ labyrinth, simultaneously exploring its depths as they attempt to escape it. As a writer, the protagonist seeks the Minotaur and states he might even attempt to *invent* one (56), but as a survivor he must try to avoid encountering it all costs. This double-edged approach resonates with the work of Borges, “the author the narrator resorts to most frequently” (Jastrzebska, 24)<sup>126</sup>, particularly his “Casa de Asterión”. The good-natured Minotaur in the Argentine’s story is characterized by a destructive playfulness. The labyrinthine Archive in *El material humano* is initially portrayed as a kind of literary playground, where references to all kinds of texts are made possible. Quickly, though, the enthusiastic writer is replaced by a cowering investigator, one who is aware that the lethal facts of the Archive—the testimony they bear in their dormant state—can come to life through a process of inquiry and narrative construction. Fiction, in this manner, is truly performative: it is constantly struggling to resuscitate fragments of the past, even if said fragments resist novelization.

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<sup>125</sup> “qué clase de Minotauro puede esconderse en un laberinto como éste. Tal vez sea un rasgo de pensamiento hereditario creer que todo laberinto tiene su Minotauro. Si éste no lo tuviera, yo podría caer en la tentación de inventarlo”

<sup>126</sup> “el autor al que recurre el narrador con más frecuencia”

Yet the temptation of finding the Minotaur also points out the problematic notion that state-sponsored violence can be simplified as belonging to a univocal, originary source. The idea that this Archive can be somehow traced back to a particular origin is progressively deconstructed throughout the text. The reader learns early on that Benedicto Tun, a central character in *El material humano*, founded the “Gabinete de Identificación” in 1922, and it is tempting to associate the inception of the Archive with Tun himself. Such temptation is laid before the narrator from the very beginning of the novel, by an investigator of the Police Archive appropriately named Ariadna. She tells the narrator that Tun “Perhaps could work as a guiding thread for your...*investigation?*” (14)<sup>127</sup>. Ariadna thus offers him a thread that could lead him out of the labyrinth, back to the origin of the Archive itself. And yet, the Archive has always been there, even prior to the establishment of the “Gabinete de Identificación”. Perhaps the only way to deconstruct the idea that Tun is the incarnation of the Archive—that the Archive’s origin is somewhere to be found—would be to provide Tun with flesh and blood; that is, to humanize him.

As founder and lifelong director of the “Gabinete de Identificación”, Benedicto Tun emerges as the incarnation of the Archive. “My objective is to make a list of the most remarkable or grotesque file cards,” the narrator explains at the beginning, asserting that this work “would allow one to glimpse the figure of a man, Benedicto Tun” (17)<sup>128</sup>. He will go ahead to embark on an investigation which depends, to a great extent, on the information with which Tun’s son, his living heir, will supply him

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<sup>127</sup> “Tal vez podría servirte de hilo conductor para tu...*investigación?*”

<sup>128</sup> “Me propongo hacer una lista de las fichas más llamativas o esperpénticas” / “podría dejar entrever la figura de un hombre, el bachiller Benedicto Tun” (17)

with. Slowly but surely, the figure of Benedicto Tun will begin to take shape within the shadows of the archive. Resorting to a prosopopeic inversion, the Archive itself will now seem to speak for its deceased creator.

In *El material humano*, Benedicto Tun is portrayed as an individual whose only allegiances were to the proper functioning of the Archive. After the 1965 suicide of the former director of the police, Tun was pressured by those in power to claim, for political interests, that his death was in fact the result of murder. However, “Tun refused to change the report, despite the pressures he was subjected to [...] This almost cost him time in jail—he assures me—. When pressured, he tendered his resignation, but they didn’t accept it, and he had to continue working in the *gabinete* for three more years” (109)<sup>129</sup>. A limited portrayal of Benedicto Tun is provided by some of the memorandums found in La Isla. However, he is truly presented as a man of flesh and blood through his son’s account. The latter agrees to speak of his father to the narrator, providing oral accounts which humanize an individual fascinated by scientific inquiry and the proper administration of the Archive. Benedicto Tun “Was a man with power, sheltered in his work. As I tell you—the son insists—, his Mayan Quiché origin was a problem for him. He even had slight problems in diction, and that’s why he didn’t like to speak too much in public too much” (157)<sup>130</sup>. The son’s account portrays a man of principle, even if that principle was limited almost exclusively to the proper functioning of the archive, particularly under the guise of a

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<sup>129</sup> “Tun se negó a cambiar el dictamen, a pesar de las presiones de que fue objeto [...] Esto casi llegó a costarle la cárcel –me asegura–. Ante las presiones, él presentó su renuncia, pero no la aceptaron, y tuvo que seguir trabajando en el gabinete tres años más”

<sup>130</sup> “Era un hombre con poder, refugiado en su trabajo. Como le digo—insiste el hijo—, su origen maya quiché fue un problema para él. Incluso, tenía leves problemas de dicción, y por eso no le gustaba mucho hablar en público”

rigorous scientific operation. This pragmatic, technical method is acknowledged as the result of Benedicto Tun's administration. Tun was "serious and ambitious in his scientific zeal. But he was not dogmatic. He was an empiricist and also a scholar who experimented constantly. He created the Gabinete de Identificación practically on his own" (107)<sup>131</sup>. Tun remained the director of the Archive even after 1944, during the *Primavera democrática* (1944-1954) which followed the *Revolución del '44* that put an end to the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico, thus appearing to be independent from political agendas while embracing an exclusive commitment to the Archive. In this sense, the novel's repeated references to Stefan Zweig's *Fouché* suggest a certain resemblance between the calculating French politician, divorced from any ideological allegiances, and Benedicto Tun. Fouché, who according to Zweig was feared by Robespierre himself during the Reign of Terror, acted on a combination of Machiavelian cunning and keen political instinct. Yet whereas Fouché's allegiances were always with the majority, as Zweig asserts—no matter what that majority stood for—, Tun's dedication was to the Archive and the Archive alone.

The methods used for logging and classifying prisoners in the Police Archive were efficient and dependable. While the Vucetich system was initially in place—whereby domicile, civil status, and other observations could be included in the corresponding index cards—the simpler Henry system was instituted in 1969, "thanks to the will of the U.S. Embassy—with the purpose of having American investigators

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<sup>131</sup> "serio y ambicioso en el afán científico. Tampoco era dogmático. Fue un empírico y también un estudioso que experimentaba constantemente. Él creó prácticamente solo el Gabinete de Identificación"

able to interpret the index cards without difficulty” (17)<sup>132</sup>. The Archive’s arbitrary nature is not revealed solely by the rules governing its operation; rather, it is made evident by the manner in which those rules are put to work, in the ability of the classificatory system to expand and contract in order to persecute those who the state deems fit, and in its capacity to cover the use of indiscriminate violence with the guise of efficiency and legality. The list of prisoner index cards displayed on the “Segunda Libreta” attest to this fact: the examples provided retain a spectral aura, and the division between “Delitos Políticos” and “Delitos Comunes” appears as arbitrary as the reasons for the arrests themselves. Hence the existence of index cards such as the following:

- “Barrientos Luis Alfredo. Born in 1924. Journalist. Arrested in 1956 for protesting. In 1958 for propagating exotic ideas” (22)<sup>133</sup>.

In “The Body and the Archive” (1989), Allan Sekula traces the first rigorous system of archival cataloguing of photographs, which was invented by Alphonse Bertillon in the late XIX century. Sekula explains how “Bertillon arrested the criminal body, determined its identity as a body that had *already* been defined as a criminal, by means that subordinated the image—which remained necessary but insufficient—to verbal text and numerical series” (Sekula 360). The textualization of the body and its corresponding photograph consequently created a process of inscription that condemned the arrested individual, in much the same way that the presence of the prisoners’ facts on the index cards engraved them with a crime a priori.

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<sup>132</sup> “por voluntad de la Embajada de Estados Unidos –con el propósito de que los investigadores norteamericanos pudieran interpretar las fichas sin dificultad”

<sup>133</sup> Nace en 1924. Periodista. Fichado en 1956 por manifestante. En 1958 por propagar ideas exóticas

Before presenting the list of the “most remarkable and grotesque file cards” found in the Archive, the narrator explains that both the Vucetich and Henry systems “designate a place for the photographs of prisoners, and there more than a few images which have been preserved” (18)<sup>134</sup>. The ensuing list shows identification cards that preceded the instauration of the Henry system, and therefore included more elaborate—though certainly brief—descriptions of the prisoners to which they referred. Although the bulleted list in *El material humano* provides what could be considered textual snapshots of the arrested subjects—particularly given that some of the entries include descriptions of their distinctive physical attributes—the respective photographs do not accompany the text.

According to André Bazin, with photography “we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re-presented*, set before us, that is to say, in time and space” (92). This is surely the case with photographs which are not digitally encoded. The photographs in the Police Archive, however, attest to a reality of presence that is immediately put into question by the context in which they are found. In other words, the photographs that were to be attached to the index cards of the Police Archive in fact signal a kind of double absence. On the one hand, they display what all photographic portraits retain: the element of impending Death to which Barthes alludes to throughout *Camera Lucida*. However, on the other hand, by the very presence constitutive of photography—the certitude that the person *was there*—the viewer is forced to acknowledge that those people photographed were taken into custody, and are hence most likely no longer *here*.

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<sup>134</sup> “designan un lugar para las fotografías de los reos, y no son pocas las imágenes que se han conservado”



As Sekula demonstrates, the police archive introduced a new way of restraining and inscribing the criminal by means of photography, through a process which created “a silence that silences. The protean oral ‘texts’ of the criminal and pauper yield to a ‘mute testimony’ that ‘takes down’ (that diminishes in credibility, that transcribes) and unmask the disguises, the alibis, the excuses and multiple biographies of those who find or place themselves on the wrong side of the law” (Sekula 345). Like the archive, the photograph on the identity card paradoxically displaces the utter singularity of the person *re*-presented in the portrait. If Bertillon’s police archive silenced the multifariousness of life through a standardized inscription of the body, La Isla’s archive shows, in addition, that the photographed individual is certainly no longer that of the image, precisely because that person is found within the Archive, within its realm of repressive brutality. The only photograph displayed in *El material humano* is found on its front cover. The corresponding identification card shows a man whose eyes and mouth have been roughly scratched off, signaling an attempt to hide his identity. The image exudes violence; two corners of the photograph have been ripped off the identification card to which it is attached, and the remaining parts of the body appear maimed, cut short by the wear and tear of time, remitting to the manner in which the recently discovered Police Archive itself is similarly mutilated.

The index cards, photographs, and prisoner files all arrest and circumscribe the identities of those who were subjected to the Police Archive’s classification. They are indexical traces of an extraliterary reality, but also appear to resist narrative ordering. *El material humano* therefore constitutes itself as a literary laboratory which allows

Rodrigo Rey Rosa to experiment with the possibilities of narration, which both mimics and challenges the mechanisms at work in the Police Archive. The arbitrary nature of the latter's operations is hidden under the semblance of legality and scientific method, embodied in the classification of the prisoner index cards and their corresponding photographs. The novel's attempt to present Tun as the incarnation of the Archive—as a possible cipher for the Archive's origin—is progressively dismantled and laid bare in its dangerous simplicity. Such deconstruction shows that “The truth of the Archive, the secret of its secret, is that it contains no truth but that “dispersion that we are and make,” as Foucault put it” (González Echeverría 37). The title of the novel itself seems to refer to both the hundreds of individuals who were, mostly for reasons of state terrorism, classified and inscribed in the Archive, but also to the possibilities of fiction of historicizing and laying bare the operations with which the Archive arrested the identities and bodies through its own particular fictions.

In one of the final scenes of *El material humano*, the narrator busies himself in the “Sad pastime” (138)<sup>135</sup> of reading local newspapers, of sorting through the daily violence they display. Shortly after, he grows weary and invites Pía—his daughter—to build structures made of papier-mâché blocks with him, using the very same newspapers which so disheartened him before. Who knows, the narrator wonders, “maybe there we'll find a road, an exit, or at least a lasting distraction: build houses for the poor, or doll houses, pyramids or walls, labyrinths made up of voluminous and

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<sup>135</sup> “Triste pasatiempo”

spongy blocks of newspaper” (139)<sup>136</sup>. The process of construction of this structure, the novel’s ability to transform documents attesting to a past and present violence, its capacity to reveal the malleability of the hardened facts of the archive, is the potential actualized by *El material humano*.

*Tiempos de locura* (2006), an ambitious and scrupulously researched work of nonfiction by Rafael Menjívar Ochoa, deals with a particular period in El Salvadorean history: the fifteen months between October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1979 and January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1981, ‘times of madness’ when fear and hope both reigned in the midst of general turmoil. The first of these dates refers to the *coup d’état* carried out against repressive president Carlos Humberto Romero by the young military officers of the Movimiento de la Juventud Militar, and the subsequent installment of a Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno (JRG), headed by three civilian and two military representatives. The latter date signals the definitive collapse of such a project and the beginning of the ‘Ofensiva final’ –the final, massive, and ultimately failed charge against Salvadorean state security forces led by the joint armies of the guerrilla. As the book makes clear, this was a phase of inordinate upheaval, as the traditional power configuration of the country and the allegiances of political actors shifted dramatically due to quickly changing circumstances.

Whereas *El material humano* places the archive at the service of narration – that is, it parasitizes the archive of the state through a literary account—*Tiempos de locura* places narration at the service of the archive. It does so through the use of the

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<sup>136</sup> “tal vez por ahí encontremos un camino, una salida, o al menos una distracción duradera: construir casas para pobres, o casas de muñecas, pirámides o murallas, laberintos de voluminosos y esponjosos bloques de papel periódico”

*crónica* genre, as it adopts a variety of literary techniques and conventions in order to accommodate historical facts and analyses in a “more lively story, capable of rescuing the play of passions and wills, as well as the apparent intervention of chance” (Carlos Roberto Briones II)<sup>137</sup>. Menjívar Ochoa consulted all kinds of historical records and secured vast amounts of documentation dealing with this period and including, of course, the *Informe de la Comisión de la Verdad*, put together following the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992. In addition, he interviewed eight strategic actors who held positions of power during those years, and who belonged to the different groups occupying a center stage in the narrated affairs: members of the Junta and of the military, a union leader, the chief of police, and leaders of the Christian Democrat and Communist parties. The second edition, in turn, relied heavily on new notes and journals which portrayed the corresponding events from the perspective of other fundamental actors, including murdered Jesuit priest and philosopher Ignacio Ellacuría. Menjívar Ochoa also had access to material which included interviews of other relevant characters at that time. However, as the author explains in the “Advertencia”,

This is not a chronology nor a meticulous re-counting; it would take much more space than that of this book, and much more time to write it. It is a story. The chronological order, more typical in a historical essay, has been sacrificed for the sake of agility and contextualization. This does not imply a lack of rigor or a disregard for the facts, but rather the search for a particular way of telling deeply rooted events (VII)<sup>138</sup>.

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<sup>137</sup> relato más vivo, capaz de rescatar el juego de pasiones y voluntades, así como la aparente intervención del azar”

<sup>138</sup> “No es una cronología ni un recuento minucioso; haría falta mucho más espacio que el ámbito de este libro, y mucho más tiempo para escribirlo. Es un relato. El orden cronológico, más propio de un ensayo histórico, se ha sacrificado en aras de la agilidad y la

Several words used in this prologue are worthy of attention: this a “story”, devoid of a “chronology” and concerned foremost with its “agility”. A traditional historical account, then, is not in order. Of course, neither could this be considered fiction: there is no “lack of rigor”, and the bibliographical material used in its construction proves Menjívar Ochoa’s devotion to as factually accurate an account as possible. The formal hybridity of the narrative at hand is evident from the beginning.

Why focus on this fifteen month period between 1979 and 1981? What makes it so significant, and what allowed a book of a historical bent to require three editions after the first two sold out shortly after publication? *Tiempos de locura* vividly portrays the extreme tension which led to the Romero *coup d’état*, particularly after the general conducted a vicious repression against leftist and civilian sectors during the years previous to 1979. After the Junta came to power, it was briefly believed by some that the combination of military, Communist, Christian Democrat and private sector representation in government would provide the balance of power necessary to avoid violent confrontation. In a way, the constitution of the Junta had several key actors and sectors of the population holding their breath, fleetingly hopeful, a feeling which Menjívar Ochoa masterfully recreates in an account which puts to good use his experience as a detective fiction and thriller writer. However, the more reactionary sectors in the private sector and the military, along with a distrustful guerilla leadership, ended up by disavowing the feeble government, which already lacked the legitimacy which a democratic election would’ve endowed it with. When state

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contextualización. Lo anterior no significa una falta de rigor o un desapego a los hechos, sino la búsqueda de un modo particular de contar cosas complejas y de raíces profundas”

repression didn't subside (carried out, as well, by paramilitary groups with unofficial ties to the military and private sector), the more progressive members of the Junta quit, and the conflict escalated. A paradigmatic case was the assassination of charismatic Monseñor Romero on March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1980—it is telling that no event in El Salvador was to gathered larger crowds than those at his funeral (Menjívar Ochoa 218). Finally, on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1981, diverse guerilla groups joined forces under the umbrella of the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional) and launched the 'Ofensiva final' which nearly achieved the take-over of San Salvador, but failed in the end.

In *Safari accidental* (2005), Juan Villoro famously remarked that “If Alfonso Reyes conceived of the essay as the centaur of genres, the *crónica* demands a more complex symbol: the platypus of prose” (14)<sup>139</sup>. Villoro was referring to the eclectic nature of the *crónica*, its capacity to take from the novel, the news report, the interview, the story, theater, and autobiography. There is certainly an archival impulse in both the *crónica* and in *Tiempos de locura*, as they incorporate and rearrange inscriptions and discursive practices belonging to a wide range of literary and nonliterary texts. But the *crónica* was also linked to the archive, in a more oblique manner, even at its origins, when the first conquistadores and colonizers to arrive in the Americas discursively created the new continent through a variety of legal and narrative documents. “There is no doubt,” Angeles Mateo states, “that the term *crónica* transports us to the time of the Conquista and colonization of the American continent and, therefore, refers us to the *cronistas* and historians of Indias” (13). These

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<sup>139</sup> “Si Alfonso Reyes juzgó que el ensayo era el centauro de los géneros, la *crónica* reclama un símbolo más complejo: el ornitorrinco de la prosa”

*crónicas* weren't simply literary accounts, however, but held important legal and political weight, as González Echeverría has shown. The kind of work carried out by the 'Cronista Mayor de Indias', appointed by the Crown, involved a very specific legal rhetoric and bureaucratic know-how. The law and the archive were found at the origin of "Latin American history and fiction," since they "were first created within the language of the law, a secular totality that guaranteed truth and made its circulation possible" (González Echeverría 10). A hybrid form with a penchant for the real, the *crónica* thus finds its origins in its contention with—and dependence upon—the law. And the law, as González Echeverría has proven, lies at the origin of the archive.

Despite taking the liberties of a literary account, *Tiempos de locura* aspires for a degree of objectivity found in a historical investigation, particularly as it proposes a collective kind of representation. In fact, this work "allows us to overcome the unilateral version in order to enter into a collective vision which aids the objectivity of the historical account"<sup>140</sup> (Carlos Roberto Briones III). Additionally, it strives to legitimize itself through a series of prologues and commentaries which attest to its meticulous crafting and thorough investigation. In narratological terms, its purported objectivity manifests itself in the use of the third person which establishes distance from the opinions and events described. Drawing from Villoro, once again, it's worth noting that "The kind of access one has to the facts determines the reading which must be made of them. Defining the distance separating the objective authorizes one to tell a story as insider, outsider, or curious bystander. We can call this pact between cronista

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<sup>140</sup> nos permite superar la versión unilateral para entrar en una visión colectiva que ayuda a la objetividad de la narración histórica"

and reader ‘objectivity’ (Villoro 17)<sup>141</sup>. Menjívar Ochoa’s recurrent caveats regarding the investigative limitations of *Tiempos de locura*, then, signals the difficulties involved in the creation of the book and simultaneously legitimizes the corresponding facts. A literary voice was precisely what FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales) aspired for when the institution commissioned the project. David Escobar Galindo, who wrote the commentary for the first edition, states that “Rafael Menjívar Ochoa is a literary narrator, not a professional historian: and that is the first advantage of this work. Written in the form of an open *crónica*, without showing the documentary seams, this story of historical essence reads like a feature piece with tasty testimonial ingredients” (David Escobar Galindo XVI)<sup>142</sup>. Although the documentary seams do appear in the text (and in fact, as further discuss, endow it with increased legitimacy), the use of the word “tasty,” following Escobar Galindo, seems appropriate. The work is also divided into three parts, each one separated by sections referred to as “Appetizer”<sup>143</sup>. The first “Appetizer” provides a political history El Salvador between the second half of the XIX century and the first half of the XX, thus contextualizing the military dictatorships that were to follow. The second “Appetizer” describes the *coups d’états* of the 1970s and the geopolitical position occupied by Salvador during the Cold War. An analysis of the backdrop of the narrated events, of the circumstances which gave rise to them, is considered of central importance. The

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<sup>141</sup> “El tipo de acceso que se tiene a los hechos determina la lectura que debe hacerse de ellos. Definir la distancia que se guarda respecto al objetivo autoriza a contar como insider, outsider, curioso de ocasión. A este pacto entre el cronista y su lector podemos llamarlo "objetividad".

<sup>142</sup> “Rafael Menjívar Ochoa es narrador literario, no historiador profesional: y esa es la primera ventaja del trabajo que se comenta. Escrito en forma de *crónica* abierta, sin que se le vean los costurones documentales, este relato de entraña histórica se deja leer como un reportaje con sabrosos ingredientes testimoniales”

<sup>143</sup> “Entremés”



book therefore provides a kind of conversation around the table; one were guests of all ideologies are invited to share their particular version of those dire days. There is intimacy in many of the testimonies, and Menjívar Ochoa's profession as journalist is evident in his ability to elicit delicate and previously secret information from his subjects. Furthermore, as can be inferred from the multiple editions, Salvadoreans were hungry for such a rendition of their recent past.

This *crónica*, in turn, functions as a non-official archive. It renounces a univocal vision, and emphasizes both the constructed nature of historical accounts as well as the importance of subtlety and contextualization when dealing with the past. There is a tentativeness in the rendering of *Tiempos de locura* which is drawn attention to from the start. The previously mentioned 'Warning' notes the repeated and self-conscious usage of words like "maybe" and "perhaps"<sup>144</sup>, thus acknowledging that the events described are only possible representations of those turbulent times. Referring to the events that led to president Romero's overthrow in 1979, for instance, the author states that "Perhaps there was an issue of political timing; perhaps Romero was forced to act the way he acted thanks to social pressure; perhaps he thought repression, institutionalized through absurd legal measures, would go unnoticed"<sup>145</sup> (27). The limitations of remembrance and historical reconstruction are also emphasized throughout the text, although Menjívar Ochoa conceives of this in productive rather than repressive terms: "Memories don't wear out: they are updated.

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<sup>144</sup> "Las palabras "quizá" o "tal vez" son frecuentes en el texto; hay hechos y circunstancias de los que es imposible dar una interpretación única y satisfactoria" (VII).

<sup>145</sup> "Quizá hubo un problema de *timing* político; quizá Romero se vio obligado a tomar las medidas que tomó ante la fiebre social; quizás creyó que la represión, institucionalizada a través de medidas legales absurdas, pasaría desapercibida"

This “update” is sometimes voluntary, sometimes a product of desires, sometimes the natural and necessary process of forgetfulness” (Menjívar Ochoa 17)<sup>146</sup>. There is an almost Foucauldian understanding of the productive nature of discourse, although Menjívar Ochoa certainly identifies subjective wills at work in the construction of a national history.

As a writer and journalist, Menjívar Ochoa is well aware that textual analysis, and a particular practice of reading, has as much to do with recovery of history as finding evidence from the past does. Therefore, an issue of great importance in the second edition of *Tiempos de locura* is how the final version of “La Proclama” was decided upon. “La Proclama” was, after all, the text with which the members of the Junta Revolucionaria de Gobierno announced the plan that the new government was to follow in 1979, a document which attempted to legitimize the coup and pave the road for a new El Salvador. As Menjívar Ochoa asserts, “there isn’t in the country (...) a declaration of principles as advanced in terms of social sensibility and benefits for the majorities, at least not one which had been in the hands of rulers willing to fulfill them” (120)<sup>147</sup>. After much conjecture and comparison between the ‘Proclama’ and other texts, including personal journals, Menjívar Ochoa concluded that the author was likely Jesuit leader Ignacio Ellacuría, president of the UCA (Universidad Centroamericana) and philosopher of the theology of liberation. Menjívar Ochoa offers a meticulous analysis on the text, arguing that “If the author of La Proclama had

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<sup>146</sup> “Los recuerdos no se desgastan: se actualizan. Esta “actualización” a veces es voluntaria, a veces es producto de los deseos, a veces del proceso natural y necesario del olvido”

<sup>147</sup> “no hay en el país (...) una declaración de principios tan avanzada en términos de sensibilidad social y beneficios a las mayorías, al menos no una que hubiera estado en manos de unos gobernantes dispuestos a cumplirla”

been someone else, anyone else, the issue of authorship would be a minor one” (121)<sup>148</sup>. However, with Ellacurría as the ideologue, the interpretation of the Church’s involvement in the subversive movement, both within the government and alongside the guerilla, acquired a different shade. *Tiempos de locura*, then, does not only offer a speculative narrative for fragmented events and historical data, but also hints at possible areas of inquiry for a further understanding of the past.

In her canonical *La invención de la ficción* (1992), Susana Rotker makes a spirited defense of the literary in her analysis of the *crónica*. Rotker asserts that

The factual now belongs to other disciplines, as if the esthetic and the literary could only allude to the emotional or the imaginary, as if “the literary” in a text diminished in relation to the rise in referentiality, as if other discourses were exempt of also being elaborate representations, configurations of the world, rationalizations, elaborations that find this or that for according to their time. The real referent has become mixed up with the system of representation, as if the objective in a texts was “the truth” and not a narrative strategy. (Rotker 200)<sup>149</sup>

The illusion of referentiality in allegedly factual discourses is here presented precisely as that: as an illusion, produced by specific textual means. As Rafael Guido Béjar states, referring to *Tiempos de locura*, “There’s passages which could be considered fictionalized accounts and the actors have the facets of literary characters. The experience in the noir genre, which the author so masterfully handles, has an impact

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<sup>148</sup> “Si el autor de la Proclama hubiese sido otra persona, cualquier otra persona, sería un asunto menor el tema de su autoría”

<sup>149</sup> Lo factual ha quedado para otras disciplinas, como si lo estético y lo literario sólo pudieran aludir a lo emocional o imaginario, como si “lo literario” de un texto disminuyera con relación al aumento de la referencialidad, como si los otros discursos estuvieran eximidos de ser también representaciones elaboradas, configuraciones del mundo, racionalizaciones, elaboraciones que encuentran tal o cual forma de acuerdo con la época. Se ha confundido el referente real con el sistema de representación, como si lo objetivo de un texto fuera “la verdad” y no una estrategia narrativa”

on this historical rendition” (XVIII)<sup>150</sup>. There are certainly mechanisms by which the text seeks to legitimize itself, particularly as it strives for objectivity. However, its strength lies in its capacity to render the fragmented bits and pieces of a particularly turbulent time with narrative consistency, all the while pointing out the limitations of such an approach.

*Senselessness*, by Castellanos Moya, revolves around the testimonies shared by the indigenous victims of the internal conflict in an unnamed country closely resembling Guatemala. Like *El material humano*, the dangers of the civil war are alive and present, despite the fact that the story takes place shortly after the signing of the Peace Accords. The unnamed first-person narrator is hired as a stylistic corrector and copyeditor of the testimonies of these indigenous survivors, as the Archbishop’s office is putting out a report detailing the different kinds of human rights crimes carried out during the war, mostly by the military. From the first page the reader learns that the object of this report is to reveal and leave record of the way in which indigenous populations were decimated, such as the case of a “Cakchiquel man who had witnessed his family’s murder,” and had “watched, albeit wounded and powerless, as soldiers of his country’s army scornfully and in cold blood chopped each of his four small children to pieces with machetes” (1-2). These are the first corpses of many that will surface throughout the novel and, as a writer, it will be the protagonist’s responsibility and challenge to edit their accounts. Simultaneously, he’ll attempt to cope as best as his can with these events, without ending up like the population of a

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<sup>150</sup> “Hay pasajes que pueden considerarse hechos novelados y los actores tienen facetas de personajes literarios. La experiencia en el género negro, que con tanta maestría maneja el autor, impacta esta exposición histórica”

“country that was not complete in the mind” (3). The novel therefore negotiates the personal, esthetic appreciation of the testimonies and the dire, real-life events they refer to, producing a partial, problematic identification between writer and the texts he’s editing. The act of reading, in this manner, takes center stage: these *testimonios* are to a great extent powerful because of their literary qualities. Their conditions of production and the position of the witnesses get displaced to a secondary role, as their extraliterary dimension is seemingly supplanted, in turn, by the texts’ poetic attributes.

*Senselessness* brings to the forefront the contingent nature of *testimonio* by emphasizing the determinant role that the reader and the act of reading have on the text’s potential impact. After discussing the narrator’s job, his friend Toto tells him that “living with a text like that twenty-four hours a day could be fatal to someone as compulsive as I was, it would ratchet up my paranoia to truly unhealthy levels” (20). This is, in fact, what the narrator is faced with while working through these testimonies<sup>151</sup>. He progressively loses his mind, as the compulsive reading of these texts bring about the protagonist’s psychological breakdown. Significant, too, is the fact that these testimonies have undergone multiple processes of mediation. After all, this is

a project that dozens and dozens of people had participated in, beginning with the group of missionaries who had managed to record the oral testimonies of the Indians, witnesses and survivors, most of whom didn’t even speak Spanish very well and who were afraid above all else of anything that had to do with the events they had been victims of, followed by those in charge of transcribing the tapes, and ending with teams of distinguished professionals,

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<sup>151</sup> This “working through”, as will be discussed later in reference to Idelber Avelar’s work, is of central importance in Castellanos Moya’s novel.

who would classify and analyze the testimonies and who would then also write up the report. (6)

The narrator does not have direct contact with the original testimonies or with their subjects of enunciation, and any illusion of immediacy is done away with from the start. The effect they have over the narrator is not based, then, on an always already problematic connection to their site of utterance, and to that purported authenticity, but rather to their condition and attributes as textual constructs.

There is, however, a complex relationship between the effects produced by the texts on the narrator and both their poetic and extraliterary dimensions. On the one hand, the narrator is well aware that his job is a delicate one, and that it is not devoid of specific dangers, particularly as it draws attention to the military's past crimes. He asserts his job was to "make sure that the Catholic hands about to touch the balls of the military tiger were clean and had even gotten a *manicure*, because that was what my work was all about, cleaning up and giving a *manicure* to the Catholic hands that were piously getting read to squeeze the tiger's balls" (5). The narrator understands the perils of getting involved with work that affects the army's interest, even when choosing to describe it in this somewhat farcical language. On the other hand, it is the reading of the testimonies, along with the narrator's poetic sensibility, which draw him in and in turn exacerbate his state of mental instability. He is enthralled and simultaneously terrified as a result of the testimonies' literary attributes, such as one whose "musicality perplexed me when I first read it, its poetic quality too high not to suspect that it came from some great poet rather than from some very old indigenous woman who with this verse had brought to an end her wrenching testimony" (32).

Despite the dangerous context which foregrounds the narrator's work, it is the testimonies' poetic dimension which catalyze his fear and produces effects beyond the text itself. It is relevant that the narrator has no particular sympathy for the cause for which he works, and in fact, as Castellanos Moya explains, "He has the passion that a poet has for language, and that's why he sees aspects of Vallejo in those phrases, he sees poetry in those phrases. So there is a passion for language. But he is not committed to anything. He is an absolutely un-committed character" (Fuentes)<sup>152</sup>. The impact of the text is not configured along ideological lines, and is a consequence of an esthetic, rather than ethical, judgment.

This occurs again and again, as the testimonies read by the narrator begin to seep into his daily life. Fear, anxiety, paranoia, and even the violence of the accounts acquire a performative quality as he begins to act them out in moments of extreme emotional distress. After initially being denied payment for his editing work by one of the bureaucrats in the archbishop office, the narrator goes back to reading the testimonies, focusing on one particular case describing the manner in which an officer used his knife to stab a civilian. This activates an aggressive fit, such that "suddenly my fury grew into a paroxysm of rage, even if no one could've imagined anything of the sort," until "I stood up and began to pace around the room, by now I was utterly possessed, my imagination whipped up into a whirlwind that in a split second carried me into the office of the aforementioned" (27). As Jonathan Culler asserts when tracing the development and deconstruction of the concept of the performative, "The

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<sup>152</sup> Tiene la pasión que tiene un poeta por el lenguaje, y por eso es que ve en las frases las cosas de Vallejo, ve poesía en las frases. Entonces sí hay una pasión por el lenguaje. Pero él no tienen compromiso con nada. Es un personaje absolutamente descomprometido.

distinction between performative and constative (...) has the great virtue of alerting us to the extent to which language performs actions rather than merely reporting them” (142), such that “the first result of the performative is to bring to center stage a use of language previously considered marginal –an active, world-making use of language, which resembles literary language– and to help us to conceive of literature as act” (145). The reaction of the narrator sheds light on this performative attribute, one, according to Culler, closely related to that of literary language. It shows testimonies capable of producing effects beyond their textual representation, brought about by the poetic quality which so conditions the narrator’s response. It should be pointed out that this kind of staging does not necessarily signal an extratextual enactment of solidarity; in fact, the narrator is a fairly cynical individual, and the fear and rage produced by the reading of the testimonial texts have little to do with the possibility of selfless action or commitment. Despite the narrator’s worst intentions, so to speak, these testimonies prove to carry an extratextual weight precisely because of their unique literariness.

The archive plays a central role in the novel, and appears recurrently through diverse, yet complementary, manifestations. At an initial, basic level, the report put forth by the Archbishop’s office functions as an archive that brings together the testimonies of the victims of the civil war, as well as different historical analyses of the conditions which propitiated their production. In this sense, this archive acts as the depository of past events and as rendition of their current relevance, bringing together both the ‘raw facts’ as described by the witness accounts of the crimes and the experts’ assessments of the corresponding information. As the narrator explains, “the report



could be divided into four volumes, the first two containing the bulk of the aftermath of the massacres of villagers, the third containing the historical context, and the fourth consisting of a list of the massacres and their victims” (56). The protagonist is in charge of editing and cleansing this archive, offering a final version of the “one thousand one hundred pages” which would be “more manageable for the reader” (56). As such, he is not only in charge of the language of the accounts, but also responsible for their particular organization and presentation, an essential aspect given that “Archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives” (Derrida 18). He is thus endowed with elementary but simultaneously fundamental archival obligations, as the specific arrangement of the archive’s content will determine the manner in which the past trauma is reconstructed.

Additionally, the archive also appears in its most terrifying guise: as the central nervous system of the repressive regime, a command center where information on actual and potential threats to the state is gathered, analyzed, and put in the disposition of the security apparatus. In one of his few interactions with colleagues from the Archbishop’s office, the narrator goes out for lunch with Joseba, a Basque psychiatrist who has been in charge of drafting a section of the report, specifically the one dealing with the psychosocial effects of the war. He describes how, halfway through the meal,

that cunning fox, perhaps intuiting the imminent arrival of a squall, asked me as if in passing if I knew what The Archive was, with as much candor as if he were mentioning a child’s bookshelf or the drawer he keeps his puzzles in, a question that couldn’t fail to cause me the greatest astonishment, so much that it took me a few minutes to react, stunned by my interlocutor’s imprudence, for nobody talked about The Archive in public, much less in a restaurant just a few blocks away from the presidential palace in whose chambers The Archive had its headquarters, a restaurant where more than a few officials and specialists from that sinister office undoubtedly ate on a daily basis (75-76).

This is the same Archive as that described by Rodrigo Rey Rosa in *Piedras encantadas*, a place run during the postwar period by characters as sinister as “the Shadow,” capable of putting the Archive’s capabilities at the disposition of those with the necessary means regardless of their purposes. And, in fact, the murders and massacres described in the Archbishop’s report –the testimonies gathered in the archive that recovers the historical memory–, were orchestrated in this very Archive. This Archive is as alive as the trauma inflicted by the repressive regimes on the civilian population; it operates in the same area as the Archbishop’s office, and its patrons and employees intermingle with the rest of the people in the city, completely shrouded in a veil of impunity. As the narrator explains, “The Archive was in fact the office of the military intelligence where the political crimes mentioned in the report had been planned and ordered” (76). In this manner, the military Archive and the Archbishop’s office archive are pitted against each other, each in turn revealing the underbelly of the other, as if engaged in a macabre game of reflections. In a sense, both archives constitute themselves as mirrors, built upon the images cast by their counterparts.

What is one to do with these apparently diametrically opposed archives? Is this simply a matter of contending depositories of information, both capable of influencing prevailing discourse on the civil war and its aftermath? Is the military Archive that which paradoxically legitimizes the claims made by the Archbishop office’s archive? Does it grant, albeit its worst intentions, the latter’s testimonies with their unquestionable claim to an irreducible extraliterary dimension? Perhaps an instance of

intra-novelistic discourse present in *Senselessness* provides an answer. The third moment in which the archive appears offers itself as a kind of metaliterary device, providing clues into the construction of the novel itself, given that it deals with historical material that could serve the narrator in the construction of a fictional text. After all, the narrator is also a writer, albeit a fairly frustrated one, as his literary instincts propel him to gather poetic quotes even if the reader never sees him writing or learns anything about his past literary endeavors. However, there is significant moment in the novel when one of the recently read testimonies “came back to me along with an urge to take it on and release all restraints on my imagination, for in fact no novel existed, only the desire to write it” (60). This is not merely a moment of poetic appreciation; the testimony *urges* the narrator to take it up as a source of creative writing, allowing the narrator to thematize the archive and present it as a possible object of narration.

The potential plot for the novel, based on a particular testimony, deals with the civil registrar of a town called Totonicapán. According to this intertext, the military came into the town to capture the local registrar and retrieve the register, “for the lieutenant urgently needed a list of the villagers who had died in the previous ten years so he could bring them back to life so they could vote for the party of General Ríos Montt” (60). Ríos Montt, both in the novel and in present-day Guatemala, is an ex-dictator accused of ordering some of the most vicious massacres during the civil war, notoriously as part of his scorched earth policy (Booth 134). As the testimony explains, the register signaled important political implications, as the names of the dead were to be used for electoral purposes in a fraudulent manner. However, the

registrar, committed to his profession and to an ethical code, “had preferred to die rather than turn the register over to the lieutenant from the local garrison,” (61), enduring horrific torture previous to his murder. The narrator goes on to explain that he was intent on writing a novel which would inquire into the “reasons why the civil registrar of Totonicapán had preferred to be tortured and murdered rather than hand over the death register to his executioners” (61).

It is relevant that the only moment in the novel when the narrator considers taking up the pen occurs when faced with a testimony dealing with a registrar. That the register has such importance speaks to the center role the archive plays in *Senselessness*. To begin with, the dead included in the registrar’s archive are in danger of being put at the service of a reprehensible cause—the collective history of the village violently seized for purposes of electoral fraud. This, in turn, draws attention to the narrator’s own use of the testimonies, as he constantly rips them out of context in order to focus on their poetic weight and incorporate them as part of a personal narrative. There is, at this level, an underlying—if perhaps sardonic—critique of the utilitarian dynamic at work with the dead. But this draws attention, too, to the phantom of prosopopeia which haunts all testimonial writing.

In the testimony which so fascinates the narrator, the registrar has his head chopped off with a machete by the lieutenant—the same machete which has previously hacked all of his fingers. The narrator asserts that following his decapitation “the civil registrar would start to tell his story, always with the fingerless palms of his hands pressing together the two halves of his head to keep his brains in place, *for I am not a total stranger to magical realism*” (61, my emphasis). On one hand, this can be read as

a boutade against magical realism, particularly in a context where the magical would seem to be at odds with the extraliterary dimension of the events at hand. Additionally, however, the whole novel functions as a rant against institutions of all sorts: military, religious and, why not, the literary as well. There is, throughout the text, a reaction against the power of such institutions to normalize thought and eliminate dissent. For Castellanos Moya, commitment is that which drives the narrator's paranoia, his resistance to adhere to any cause, "Because commitment seeks uniformity, commitment seeks unanimity of criteria, commitment seeks the end of dissidence, that there is only one way of looking at things. But Stalinism, religion, liberal political correction can all bring that about"<sup>153</sup> (Fuentes). As a free-thinker (in fact, as someone whose free thinking involves all the kinds of perils previously discussed), adhering to the literary institution of magical realism would imply a kind of petrification of his esthetic sensibility, precisely when it is his poetic inclinations which enable the testimonies to come to life.

But the imagined scene with the registrar tells more: it has all the familiar symptoms of a suspect auratic practice, as conceived by Alberto Moreiras. The auratic practice "here means the constitution of a self-legitimizing locus of enunciation through the simultaneous positing of two radically heterogeneous fields of experience—the experience of the dead and the experience of the living, their experience and mine or ours—and the possibility of a relational mediation between them through prosopopeia" (*Exhaustion* 223). Prosopopeia, understood as "a mask

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<sup>153</sup> "Porque el compromiso busca la uniformidad, el compromiso busca la unanimidad de criterios, el compromiso busca que no haya disidencias, que haya una sola forma de ver las cosas. Por eso te lo puede dar tanto el estalinismo, como la religión, como la política de la corrección de los liberales"

through which one's own voice is projected unto another, where that other is always suffering from a certain inability to speak" (*Exhaustion* 224), inevitably involves a hierarchical relational mediation. And, of course, the mask would be that of the registrar's own head –a head barely held together by the fingerless, suffering hands which so diligently worked on keeping an archive of the dead. Thus, not only the archive, but also the indigenous registrar, would come to be parasitically exploited by the narrator's novel in his "desire to write it" (60). As a source of primordial truth, as the guardian of the indigenous history itself, the registrar would endow the narrator with the legitimacy necessary to speak of the other. The dead speaking for the dead, so to speak, raising the stakes of this auratic practice to a practice of the post auratic, that is, "a relational mediation between two heterogenous realms no longer based on mimesis", but "rather based precisely on the impossibility of mimesis: a simulation, then, a repetition, whose moment of truth is the loss of truth itself" (223). Moreiras takes "Alturas de Macchu Picchu," Pablo Neruda's poem, as the foundation for his argument, given the poet's now notorious verse: "speak through my words and my blood"<sup>154</sup>. The narrator of *Senselessness* would therefore be guilty of Neruda's same conceit; that of employing the face of the other, through a prosopopeic twist, in order to grant himself a coveted position of self-empowerment.

But, isn't the narrator already doing this by utilizing the testimonies found in the Archbishop's report? Isn't his appropriation of the testimonial fragments for the use of a personal narrative a paradigmatic case of an auratic practice? Following the initial moment of this literary fantasy, the narrator shies away from the possibility of

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<sup>154</sup> "Hablad por mis palabras y mi sangre"

writing the fictional account. He censures himself for “wallowing in any of the testimonies that I would never turn into a novel, because no one in his right mind would be interested in writing or publishing or reading yet another novel about murdered indigenous peoples” (62). And yet, in a way *Senselessness* is a novel precisely about that. What, then, distinguishes his swiftly dropped literary project from the novel the reader has before him or herself? I would venture that the interpretive undecidability presented by the testimonies, their resistance to a univocal critical response, offers an answer. It is not the narrator who speaks through these testimonies, but rather the testimonies that speak through him despite the narrator himself. They interfere with his daily life and disrupt the illusion of an orderly experience, one in a textual dimension would find itself removed from an extraliterary reality—one, in the end, where the esthetic would simply be available for confinement, as if the narrator’s sensibility were capable of isolating the testimonies’ poetic aspect from that to which they refer. Notwithstanding the fact that he reduces them to mere, albeit powerful, poetic capsules—that is, by circumscribing them to an aesthetic realm—these testimonies resist again and again the classificatory straitjacket imposed by the narrator.

The narrator’s archival drive, his own attempt to pigeonhole these textual fragments in a particular category, fails in the end. Despite acting as the editor and cleanser of the testimonies, he is ultimately contaminated by their language himself. Narration is incapable of domesticating the horror to which it attests. As he notes, the Archbishop’s report contains “testimonies which seemed like concentrated capsules of pain” (18), and yet, as Elaine Scarry has argued, there are difficulties, in fact

impossibilities, in the representation of pain. Shattered, mutilated bodies populate the novel, and the grammatical structure of the testimonies themselves seems subjected to this fragmentation, as if the possibility of language to portray these traumatic events was itself put up to question. The narrator is drawn to these fragments with a kind of morbid awe, such as that “phrase whose broken syntax was the corroboration that something had snapped in the psyche of the survivor who said it” (136). The archive, in this manner, is not capable of ordering or organizing, and it certainly does not make sense of the events of the past; if anything, it functions as a cipher for the senselessness to which the title alludes. If the Archbishop’s archive offers the possibility of recovering silenced witness accounts and the military’s Archive functions as its counterpart –that which produces and simultaneously attests to the irreducible reality of said testimonies–, the intertext’s register signals the resistance with which narration is faced when confronting the archive. The deathmask of prosopopeia inhabits any such project, and inverting that operation –having the testimonies speak through the narrator– inevitably involves all kinds of psychological perils.

The archives in *Senselessnes* are not, after all, simply stockpiles of information. They intrude, they question motives, they interpellate those who attempt to manipulate them. This is the manner, in fact, in which the novel ends: once the narrator suffers a mental breakdown due to the unendurable stress of identifying with these testimonies, he is forced to leave the country and take distance from the horrors he has vicariously witnessed. Sitting at a German bar, at the end of the novel, he catches a glimpse of someone staring back at him through the reflection of a mirror.



This is a murky episode, infused with the alcoholic delusions caused by the narrator's considerable drinking, but that is where he is "when all of a sudden I realized to my amazement that leaning against the bar to my right and drinking was General Octavio Pérez Mena himself—*shit!*—the very same face I had seen through the rear window was now looking at me insolently through the mirror" (140). General Octavio Pérez Mena, a name that clearly alludes to General Otto Perez Molina—a Guatemalan general accused of human rights crimes during the civil war, and current president of the country—haunts the narrator even after he has left the country. Yet this is also a face looking back at him through the mirror, and a tenuous identification between narrator and perpetrator takes place. Perhaps this signals a kind of shared responsibility, an awareness that his own use of the testimonies—of those indigenous voices and lives—irrevocably links him to the violence that led to their enunciation in the first place. And here, recalling Benjamin's well known thesis seems appropriate: "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism".

Benjamin's thoughts on allegory also seem relevant for a reading of *Senselessness*, particularly as conceived by Idelber Avelar's *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Literature and the Task of Mourning*. Avelar's purpose is to offer readings of postdictatorial literary texts that work through mourning—a task which is never completely fulfilled—as a means of surmounting the trauma of dictatorship. "The mourner is by definition engaged in a task that s/he does not want to conclude," Avelar asserts, and "It is in this sense, then, that one speaks of the interminability of mourning work: mourning necessarily poses itself an

unrealizable task” (5). For Avelar, it is in this resistance to restitution that postdictatorial works react against the neutralization of memory: they refuse to normalize the defeat resulting from the dictatorships and the oblivion inherent to contemporary market-driven societies. This trauma is not simply mulled over or surpassed, but rather, like all trauma, appears recurrently in different forms, privileging in turn the site of literary production. In *Senselessness*, of course, trauma plays a central role as the narrator does not in actuality remember the traumatic events but rather acts them out.

According to Jastrebezca, for instance, there are “two converging lines in the analysis of the text: that of narrating the trauma in order to overcome it and that of estheticizing violence” (22)<sup>155</sup>. Though not responding directly to Jastrebezca, Grinberg Pla would seem to differ, as she asserts that “the processes of fictionalization should not be understood primordially as an attempt of esthetization but rather refer to an attempt to understand by means of the imagination the traumatic experiences others have suffered (or inflicted) during the war” (“Memoria”)<sup>156</sup>. Despite contending understandings of the significance of these testimonies’ esthetic import, both critics underscore trauma as an irreducible kernel which informs the narrative construction of the text. Trauma in *Senselessness* is not, however, overcome, but rather acted out in a repetitive, yet always varying loop by the narrator.

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<sup>155</sup> “determinan dos líneas convergentes del análisis del texto: la de narrar el trauma para superarlo y la de estetizar la violencia”

<sup>156</sup> “los procesos de ficcionalización no deben ser entendidos en primer término como un intento de estetización sino que sobre todo se trata de un intento de comprender por medio de la imaginación las experiencias traumáticas que otros han sufrido (o infligido) durante la guerra”

I would argue that it is in this mourning—in the working through trauma brought about by the dictatorships that this particular kind of mourning involves—that the possibility of a tenuous identification between narrator and victim is suggested. The narrator, of course, has not endured the traumatic events described in the testimonies directly, as these events are irreducibly linked to the victims themselves. However, the repetition of those traumatic events through their performative acting out points to the trauma's collective nature. In fact, the narrator himself had to leave the neighboring country of El Salvador after referring to his nation's leader's "dictatorial attitude" (37), and now, while working on the report, realizes that not only is this country not complete in the mind, but that "I am also not complete in the mind" (3). That is, despite the narrator's fervent attempts to distance himself from the community of victims and survivors, and from those who work on behalf of recovering their buried accounts, the "breakdown of his own psychic apparatus" (2) establishes a common space of interpellation.

Perhaps, as the narrator noted, people are no longer interested in reading another novel about murdered indigenous people—maybe the publishing industry, as he points out, has moved on, and so have consumers of contemporary Central American literature—but the inscription of said massacres, the writing of such trauma, persists. And this is where a kind of shared experience of trauma appears in the text, rising from the past despite the narrator's intentions. He belongs, whether he wants to or not, to a present carved out by the traumatic experiences of the dictatorships. Trauma insists, it does not give up, and in so doing invites the "untimely eruption of the past" (Avelar 3). One of the victims shared his testimony, the narrator asserts, "so

that I could read it and make stylistic corrections, a testimony that began, in fact, with the sentence *I am not complete in the mind*' (2). And although the protagonist refuses to identify himself with the victims, even though the process of aesthetic appreciation and familiarization interrupts any possible solidarity, which is precisely how the novel begins: "I am not complete in the mind" (1). It is as if the esthetic element in these testimonies can never become familiar, for the working-through of the traumatic event continuously resists normalization of the past.

Yet mourning, as Avelar points out following Benjamin's lead, is inextricably tied to allegory. And allegory concerns postdictatorial literature in Latin America not as a device by which writers can address a problematic reality obliquely, or indirectly, as the mundane understanding of allegory would have it. Rather, "Allegory is the aesthetic face of political defeat (...) not due to some extrinsic controlling agency but because the petrified images of ruins, in their immanence, bear the only possibility of narrating the defeat. Ruins are the raw material that allegory possesses at its disposal" (Avelar 69). Allegory, that is, holds a unique relationship with time, given that "Whereas the symbol privileges timeless, eternalized images, allegory, by virtue of being a ruin, is necessarily a temporalized trope, bearing within itself the marks of its time of production" (Avelar 4) and insisting on "the survival of the past as a ruin of the present" (Avelar 5). It is in this manner that mourning holds an allegorical structure, and that the ruin constitutes itself as the privileged site of allegorical narratives. In *Senselessnes*, the Archbishop's archive would thus come to function as the allegorical ruin par excellence, a site where the death, destruction, and debris of the past erupts into the present. The possibility of narrating the defeat is housed within

this archive, and yet, this archive is built upon fragments and broken testimonial traces which attest to the past but resist narrative restitution.

Here, too, a link is established between *Senselessness* and *El material humano*, for both archives function as ruins, acting as ciphers for the catastrophe of the past. As the narrator of Rey Rosa's novel explains,

Between two modules of the old hospital, there was a hump of earth on which a trail was traversed by carts coming and going with documents that were being relocated for their cleaning, cataloguing and digitalization. Shortly after the rainy season, with the drought, the surface of the mound, where grass was already growing, cracked slightly, and someone discovered that under the earth there were papers, cardboards, photographs. The traffic of carts was immediately suspended and the papers, which were examined, turned out to be police identity cards and other documents which made up the vestiges of the Gabinete (13)<sup>157</sup>.

This is the dormant volcano described previously, rotting in the rain yet holding evidence of the dictatorship's crimes, of a past covered up by dirt and time, ironically glossed over by carts which attempt to make sense of the archive. A putrefying past, so to speak, and yet utterly allegorical, for "In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting" (Benjamin 179).

Landscapes of death and destruction are conjured up in the enactment of the testimonies carried out by the protagonist of *Senselessness*, and appear too in the form of the archive itself and its surroundings in *El material humano*.

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<sup>157</sup> "Entre dos módulos del antiguo hospital, había un montículo de tierra por encima del cual pasaba un sendero hecho por las carretillas que iban y venían cargadas de documentos que estaban siendo reubicados para su limpieza, catalogación y digitalización. Poco después de la estación de las lluvias, con la sequía, la superficie del montículo, donde ya crecía la hierba, se agrietó ligeramente, y alguien vio que debajo de la tierra había papeles, cartulinas, fotografías. Inmediatamente se suspendió el tráfico de carretillas y se examinaron los papeles, que resultaron ser las fichas de identidad policíacas y otros documentos que componen los vestigios del Gabinete"

As novels concerning the aftermath of the civil war in Guatemala, Rey Rosa's *El Material Humano* and Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness* deal explicitly with the creation and functionality of archives. In Rey Rosa's work, a recently uncovered police archive enables the narrator to reveal the innards of a repressive state apparatus: while addressing the relationship between power and literature in Guatemala, the author pits the formal organization of the police archive against a personal and multilayered archive constructed by literary and philosophical quotes, interviews, dream sequences, and diary entries. In Castellanos Moya's novel, an archive consisting of testimonies from survivors is cleansed grammatically by the narrator, such that, for instance, an old indigenous lady "had the chance to tell her testimony so that I would read it and grant it the pertinent stylistic edition" (14)<sup>158</sup>. He finds himself torn between the testimonies' aesthetic allure and the disarming effect produced by the very real situations to which they refer, thus emphasizing the tension between the literary and the referential attributes of *testimonio*. Menjívar Ochoa's *Tiempos de locura*, on the other hand, uses documents belonging to a varied assortment of archives in order to build an ambitious *crónica*, the archival genre par excellence. By doing so, his *crónica* endows the fragmentation and blind spots of that particular historical period with the coherence which narrative affords.

In *Tiempo pasado*, Beatriz Sarlo notes that "There is no testimony without experience, but neither is there experience without narration: language liberates that which is mute in experience, redeems experience from its immediacy and forgetfulness, and turns it into what is communicable, that is to say, the *common*"

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<sup>158</sup> "tuvo la oportunidad de contar su testimonio para que yo lo leyera y le hiciera la pertinente corrección de estilo"

(29)<sup>159</sup>. The works analyzed in this chapter contend with the archive in its multiple forms, attempting to draw out the experience of the past which is housed within it. They struggle in this project either because the archive resists narration, or because narration itself is self-aware of its own ethical and functional limitations when attempting to narrate the archive. Further complicating matters, the archive is characterized by a kind of paradoxical elusiveness: despite conventionally being thought of as possessing an orderly logic and a dependable classificatory system, it resists semantic fixation. As Marlene Manoff asserts in “Theories of the Archive Across the Disciplines,” “Two related forces are apparent in this archival discourse. One is the conflation of libraries, museums, and archives; and the other is the inflation of the term ‘archive’, which has become a kind of loose signifier for a disparate set of concepts” (Manoff, 10). It is in this undecidability that these three contemporary works operate, attempting, all the while, to lay claim to an equally elusive extraliterary reality.

Retracing our steps to the first chapter of this dissertation, it is worth recalling that *testimonio* criticism attempted to reconcile a modernist conception of representation with an ethical position that did not delegitimize the reality which *testimonio* lays out. Alberto Moreiras offers a definition of the form which attempts to avoid this aporia when he states that “Testimonio is testimonio because it suspends the literary at the very same time that it constitutes itself as a literary act: as literature, it is a liminal event opening onto a nonrepresentational, drastically indexical order of

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<sup>159</sup> “No hay testimonio sin experiencia, pero tampoco hay experiencia sin narración: el lenguaje libera lo mudo de la experiencia, la redime de su inmediatez o de su olvido y la convierte en lo comunicable, es decir, lo *común*”

experience” (“Aura” 195). The texts analyzed in this chapter all deal with the limitations of narrative in its attempt to convey such irreducible “order of experience.” Perhaps, in order to set loose the ghosts confined to the archive—to those traces of the real— these works must face the fact that those same ghosts might inhabit their own writing.



## CONCLUSION

The previous investigation sought to tease out the rhetorical conventions present in *testimonio* for two main reasons. The first dealt with the need to show that despite the form's purported demise, its spectral presence underlies the works of three seminal Central American authors endowed with a notable literary corpus. As such, it indirectly proves that "Testimonio is always then in some sense post-mortem: after death, beyond death" (Beasley-Murray, 124). It would therefore be premature, if not downright misguided, to cast *testimonio* into the confines of the academic realm, where it can gather dust while tenously reminding sympathetic critics of their longlost, noble enterprises. Additionally, however, a reading of *testimonio*'s rhetoric allows for a richer and fuller understanding of the kind of writing taking place in the region today. By exploring the exhaustion of *testimonio*, to play on the title of Alberto Moreiras' work of criticism (2001), it is possible to see that these contemporary authors have embraced some of the form's main tropes and narrative conventions as a point of departure for literary endeavors of a different nature. Such endeavors, as this dissertation has shown, involve a particular adoption of the detective fiction genre, as well as the use of the archive and the thematization of its contention with fictional narratives.

*Testimonio*, however, does not emerge unscathed from such a project. As Jorge Marcone notes when addressing a critical reading of the form, "The discursive analysis of testimonial narrative holds a moral dilemma, given that by disarming certain presuppositions about writing and orality which underly power relations, a kind of

writing is subverted with which cause, on one hand, we'd like to be sympathetic” (220)<sup>160</sup>. Nevertheless, the limitations and points of rupture of traditional testimonial projects have been pointed out on many occasions and, almost two decades after the publication of *The Real Thing*, it is clear that a formal reading of *testimonio* does not detract further from its potential as a political instrument. The moment of *testimonio* in its original guise, as John Beverley noted, has passed.

By tracing the main formal attributes present in canonical testimonial texts, as well as in the theoretical elaborations developed by several of the form's most notable critics, this dissertation circumscribed a particular rhetoric of *testimonio*. Such rhetoric was shown to be at work in the fictional works of Rodrigo Rey Rosa, Horacio Castellanos Moya, and Rafael Menjívar Ochoa. The authors' narrative projects, however, went beyond the mere adoption, parody, or reconfiguration of these literary mechanisms. They also involved the use of the detective fiction genre—while focusing on the power relations at work between witnesses and addressees—in order to draw attention to and dismantle the problematic issues of representation in *testimonio*. Additionally, by engaging with archives, their works of fiction embraced archival logics of their own. In doing so, they provided new textual configurations for confronting the archive in its different forms and for dealing with the fragments of an extraliterary reality housed within it.

It remains to be seen how the new generations of writers from the region will take on *testimonio* in their own literary projects. For now, the work of renowned

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<sup>160</sup> “El análisis discursivo de la narrativa testimonial encierra, entonces, un dilema moral puesto que al desarmar ciertos presupuestos sobre escritura y oralidad que subyacen a relaciones de poder se estaría subvertiendo una escritura con cuya causa, por un lado, quisiéramos ser solidarios” (Marccone, 220).

Guatemalan-American author Francisco Goldman shows noteworthy rearticulations of the form's literary and extraliterary concerns. The detective genre to which several of his works belong—such as *The Long Night of the White Chickens* (1992) and, more recently, *The Art of Political Murder* (2007)—incorporate *testimonio*'s conventions in innovative ways, and a novel such as *The Ordinary Seaman* (1998) is based on the fictional testimonies of Central American refugees who seek shelter in the New York harbor. Nonetheless, these works involve a diasporic sensibility, which frames and alters the manner in which the corresponding accounts are rendered. Perhaps this could be the next stop in *testimonio*'s long travels.

## APPENDIX

### INTERVIEW WITH HORACIO CASTELLANOS MOYA

IOWA CITY, IOWA (MARCH 31, 2012)

En *Insensatez*, ¿por qué es que el narrador tiene tanto interés en la estética de los testimonios?

La verdad es que yo introduzco eso porque lo necesitaba el texto. Pero en realidad el texto era más del *freak*, del personaje, trabajar cosas sórdidas, morbosas, como son los crímenes, y cómo eso lo afecta. Teniendo las frases le daba un sentido histórico, pero tampoco me interesaba el sentido histórico porque la novela ni siquiera está mencionado Guatemala como país, aunque es evidente porque son cakchiqueles y toda la historia y la descripción de la ciudad y algunos nombres propios. Pero la novela surge precisamente de una sensación de paranoia, que tiene que ver con la historia del país, porque son países regidos por criminales lo cual te crea paranoia, pero cómo surge la historia es un poquito más personal y es mucho más poner a un personaje disonante, en un medio donde la mentalidad es guardar ciertas formalidades.

Teóricamente estás en un ámbito donde se trabaja sobre derechos humanos. Este personaje es todo lo contrario. Es un personaje que más allá de que tenga sensibilidad, no es un hombre de fe. Vos no podés trabajar en nada que tenga que ver con el bien del hombre si no sos hombre de fe. Él carece de fe, no tiene ninguna fe.

¿Se puede hablar de un compromiso con el lenguaje?

Más bien tiene una pasión por el lenguaje, la palabra compromiso no es. Es muy distinta la pasión del compromiso. La pasión es vital, el compromiso son cosas ideológicas, por lo general. Es alguien que enloquece al hacer click con una ideología –cualquier tipo de ideología. Mientras que la pasión es algo que te surge de más adentro, que tiene que ver más con la emoción. Tiene la pasión que tiene un poeta por el lenguaje, y por eso es que ve en las frases las cosas de Vallejo, ve poesía en las frases. Entonces sí hay una pasión por el lenguaje. Pero él no tienen compromiso con nada. Es un personaje absolutamente descomprometido. Por eso es que es un personaje tan insólito en el marco de una realidad como esa. Porque él es descomprometido. Tiene pasión por el lenguaje, tiene necesidad del dinero, y tiene un sentido de la amistad con alguien que trabaja en eso. Y no lo ves muy claro tampoco. Y es muy paranoíco, precisamente porque los compromisos te crean paranoia. Cuando estás rodeado de gente comprometida te crea paranoia. No importa el tipo de compromiso –con la iglesia, con una línea política, con la política de corrección, todo es lo mismo.

¿En qué sentido genera paranoia el compromiso?

Porque el compromiso busca la uniformidad, el compromiso busca la unanimidad de criterios, el compromiso busca que no haya disidencias, que haya una sola forma de ver las cosas. Por eso te lo puede dar tanto el estalinismo, como la religión, como la política de la corrección de los liberales. Todo es lo mismo, todo te crea paranoia, porque buscan la unanimidad de criterios. Si vos decís “no, esto es una pendejada”, genera muchas reacciones en contra. Entonces la paranoia es “¿Qué estarán pensando

de lo que digo?” , o si actuás de forma contraria es todavía peor. Y en este caso genera una reacción paranoica porque la paranoia viene del poder, del poder del Estado, que es un poder absolutamente de terror. Y si además le ponés estar dentro de un ambiente que se opone a ese poder pero tiene otro compromiso –el poder tiene un compromiso con sus intereses, con mantener un estatus, ese es el compromiso del poder--... El compromiso de los otros es cuestionar el estatus quo. Entonces él tiene una doble responsabilidad, porque por el texto le viene la paranoia que genera el compromiso del poder, de matar a quien sea con tal de mantener el estatus quo, y por el otro lado tiene la paranoia de que está metido en medio de la Iglesia Católica sin creer en nada. Y entonces se le mezclan las paranoias, y entonces esto puede venir de aquí o allá, y tiene paranoia hacia los mismos... no sabe si el cura, este obispo, cuando se reúne en secreto con su amigo Eric o el otro, van a hablar mal de él... Entonces ese es el personaje que se buscaba crear. Entonces sí tienen pasión por el lenguaje, pero lo que más la caracteriza es la paranoia.

¿La urgencia en tus narrativas de dónde viene?

Es una necesidad de la historia, no pienso en la forma antes de empezar la historia, así que no hay apuesta formal. En el momento en que viene la historia se convierte en un reto, cómo encontrás la mejor forma de encontrarla, cómo encontrar el ritmo. Entonces hay tres o cuatro novelas que se caracterizan por tener ese ritmo. Pero hay otros ritmos que no son así, que se puede sentir que son rápidos pero con otro aliento. Y otros hasta más lentos, como mi primera novela. Y otras bastante lentos, como *Tirana memoria*, que es una novela que va bastante lenta. Pero la parte de *Tirana memoria* donde están

huyendo es bien veloz. Porque lo necesita, por es eso te digo que dependiendo del tipo de material y de situación viene el reto de encontrar la mejor forma de contarla, que se convierte eso no solo en un recurso técnico sino que también expresa una búsqueda de estilo, del mejor estilo para contar la historia. También *Desmoronamiento* tiene una primera parte que es bastante intensa pero poco a poco va cayendo, va bajando, se va desmoronando hasta que es bien lenta al final. Entonces no es una apuesta formal que yo hago al principio, sino que es una vez encontrando la historia, en el reto de cómo contarla, ahí empieza la apuesta de cómo contarla, pero sin tener un pre, una pre-definición formal.

Con *Tirana memoria* y *El luchador y la sirvienta* hay una saga de historia política salvadoreña...

Eso comienza en verdad en *Donde no estén ustedes*, que es la primera vez que aparece la familia Aragón, que es la historia del embajador Aragón, Alberto, y su padre aparece suicidándose ahí. Pero también está relacionada con otras novelas porque ya aparece Pepe Pindonga. Son los dos personajes: Alberto Aragón y Pepe Pindonga, y luego sigue con *Desmoronamiento*, que es otra rama, pero hay menciones. Entonces sí, es la historia de una familia y sus alrededores, porque no es una familia en realidad, la familia Aragón está en el centro, pero también se menciona la otra familia hondureña, y ya al final, en *La sirvienta y el luchador* ni siquiera es la historia de la familia Aragón, sino que es la excusa para contar la historia de la sirvienta y del nieto. Lo de la familia se me dio más normalmente, porque había aspectos de mi familia que yo quería recrear en ficción, pero luego cómo se fue moviendo, digamos El Vikingo,

Maria Elena, son personajes de absoluta ficción, porque no responden a alguien preciso. No es como el caso del embajador Alberto Aragón, que está basado en un primo mío que fue diplomático y tuvo un final, no así, pero más o menos así, porque con la ficción uno lo deforma todo. Y a partir de eso fue que surgió, en realidad yo quería escribir una historia de él, y al escribir esa historia de cómo muere, que no sé cómo murió realmente... Lo paradójico es que el personaje real se suicidó, y en *Donde no estén ustedes* muere de alcoholismo. Es una cosa que yo ahí invento. Y así fue como poco a poco fue creciendo. *Tirana memoria* fue la necesidad de crearle un pasado, y contar la historia del padre que se había suicidado. Entonces sí surge a partir de una familia, pero luego lo de *Desmoronamiento* tiene más que ver con la guerra entre El Salvador y Honduras y buena parte es inventada. Y en *La sirvienta y el luchador* la historia se deslizó sola hacia otro lado porque ya no había familia.

¿Mantén la familia y el contexto como mapa para futuros proyectos?

Ahí queda. Ahí quedan pero no sé. Incluso cuando comencé a escribir

*Desmoronamiento* que vi que estaba relacionada a *Donde no estén ustedes* los editores me preguntaron si iba a trabajar una trilogía o tetralogía, y yo les dije claramente que no me quería comprometer con nada. Y ahora ellos de sus pistolas pusieron ahí en *La sirvienta y el luchador* que se culmina una saga. Pero eso es la imaginación de ellos.

Uno no sabe. Ahorita como no estoy escribiendo ficción no sé, pero sí hay ahí personajes que no necesariamente son de la familia Aragón pero que sí pueden venir de *La sirvienta y el luchador* que alguna vez he pensado que me gustaría desarrollar. Por ejemplo la gorda del restaurante donde se reúnen los policías ya salió en mis



cuentos, quince veinte años atrás, salió ella. En un cuento que se llama *Némesis* que está en *El gran masturbador* ahí está ella, pero ahí está adelante. Ya está en el monte, es la cocinera de un campamento de guerrilleros. Me entendés? Entonces el personaje que tengo que crear es el interino.

Hay una especie de desgaste del cuerpo en varios de tus personajes...

Yo creo que así vive el ser humano, lo que pasa es que la mayoría de la ficción no lo acepta. Uno nunca vive sano. Siempre hay alguna preocupación. Pero estos personajes que están en el límite, como el caso del Vikingo, el cuerpo lo está matando. A Alberto Aragón el alcohol lo está matando. Por ejemplo a Pepe Pindonga la goma lo está matando siempre. Cosas de la vida cotidiana. Mucha ficción tiende a olvidar la corporalidad, está creada desde otro punto de vista. Pero la corporalidad es parte fundamental del hombre, sin cuerpo no somos nada.

¿Es posible transmitir el dolor?

No se puede transmitir el dolor, podés transmitir ciertas cualidades producidas por el dolor, pero el dolor per se es intransmisible.

Hay cierta distancia en algunos de tus narradores, en tercera persona, y otros mucho más cercanos. ¿En función de qué planteás esa urgencia?

Depende del libro. En *La sirvienta y el luchador* escribí la primera parte sin saber qué era. La captura. Empecé en el comedor de la gorda, la captura, y terminé hasta que él vomita. Toda la parte del Vikingo la escribí sin saber si eso era un cuento, novela

corta, nouvelle, un cuento largo, así la escribí. Meses después comencé a escribir “Maria Elena”, con la misma técnica, es decir en una tercera persona. Y entonces vi que podía relacionarla, porque el Vikingo sale de Tirana Memoria. Yo escribí el Vikingo casi al terminar *Tirana memoria*, porque fue como una catarsis, para sacarme de encima ese tono de *Tirana memoria*, que me tenía un poco intoxicado. Ese tono de buenas personas, tanto sentido común, tanta racionalidad, tanto bien. Tanta humanidad molesta. Para sacarme de encima toda esa humanidad, y ese tono tan conservador, creo que escribí El Vikingo. Que es la negación. El péndulo. Es un movimiento absolutamente pendular. De un lado hasta otro. Es una prosa sucia, es un tipo sucio, es sobre la suciedad de la vida.

## APENDIX

### INTERVIEW WITH ELENA PONIATOWSKA

MEXICO CITY, MEXICO (NOVEMBER 10, 2012)

¿Qué la llevó a decidir narrar *La noche de Tlatelolco* desde perspectivas múltiples?

A fines de 1968, en octubre, empecé a recoger los testimonios de la gente, de los testigos, pero todos contaban más o menos lo mismo. Entonces escogí de cada quien el texto que más me gustaba y edité el resto del texto. Entonces solo me quedé con algunos fragmentos para mí importantes. Y recuerdo por ejemplo que un preso político, Heriberto Castillo, reconocido ingeniero, me dio un texto él, me dio una entrevista larguísima, y yo solo utilicé una parte pequeña y entonces después él lo publicó como un texto suyo en una revista, para que no se perdiera.

¿Cuál fue la lógica del ordenamiento de los fragmentos?

Simplemente la lógica fue como muy personal. Lo que a mí me gustaba, lo que a mí me interesaba, lo que a mí me producía una emoción en ese momento es lo que yo insertaba. Por ejemplo, alguien que encuentra un botón en el suelo que dice “Amo el amor”, a mí eso me gustó, y lo puse, y así fui insertando cosas que a mí me llamaba la atención.

¿Qué desventajas puede haber en un testimonio con perspectivas múltiples?

Yo nunca lo vi en función de ventaja o desventaja, simplemente hice lo que a mí me salía, lo que a mí me interesaba hacer.

Cuando un texto hace una denuncia, ¿tiene el mismo peso ético que se haga desde la ficción o desde la no-ficción?

Yo siempre pongo, por ejemplo, que es una ficción lo que yo hago, porque igualmente no sé hacer pies de página, no sabría hacer biografía. Para mí es muy difícil atribuirle tal o cual frase a tal o cual persona, porque en general leo sobre lo que voy a escribir, pero no tengo la formación académica de marcar cada una de las cosas que debería decir. Yo necesitaría para eso trabajar con un equipo, con varias gentes, pero trabajo sola. Pero como no tengo la formación académica... Pero yo incluso no puedo recordar de dónde vienen las fuentes. Tendría que revisar treinta y cinco libros para saberlo. Pero tengo además el problema que en el minuto que encuentro algo que me interesa, o me apasiona, o me entusiasma o emociona, hago todo menos lo que se llama recoger o consignar de dónde salió, de qué página. A veces tengo muchísimo material en libretas de taquigrafía...

¿Cómo se diferencian los procesos para escribir una novela o un testimonio?

Es que yo no pienso en procesos. Desde hace muchos años, 1963, hacía yo entrevistas, pero hacía yo crónicas, pero también cuentos. Cuando algo se me antojaba lo convertía en un cuento. Pero yo no sabía que hubiera un proceso distinto para cada uno. Solo sabía que el cuento o la ficción o la literatura lo hacía con muchísimas más ganas o más gusto que lo que tenía que publicarse en el periódico al día siguiente. Porque en el periódico, ahí sí, tenía que ser yo súper exacta, súper cuidadosa, de no confundir un solo dato, una sola fecha, porque si no llegarían un montón de cartas poniéndome así

como santo cristo porque me había equivocado. O había escrito mal un nombre.

Cuando es novela, lo que importa es lo que tú haces, y depende también de la emoción y la felicidad con la que tú haces las cosas, porque ahí te da mucho gusto y entonces te lanzas, y escribes así y revisas. Yo reescribo y reescribo y reescribo, y lo voy enriqueciendo a medida que voy reescribiendo.

¿Por qué no ha enfocado más su obra en ficción?

Por prurito, o un poco de auto-denigración, porque yo pensaba que tenía que ser útil, y entonces ser útil era ir a preguntar por el precio de los jitomates, o mataban a los animales y los hacían sufrir en el rastro. Y entonces me dediqué muchísimos años a ese tipo de artículos, y pensé que tenía que ser útil, con lo que hacía, tenía que denunciar, y fue lo que siempre hice.

¿Y la ficción no puede denunciar también?

Claro que sí. Y yo creo que yo misma me quité muchas veces el piso debajo de los pies. Pero para eso hay que tener mucha fe en sí misma, y yo no la tenía, por una razón o por otra, creo que son rasgos de carácter.

## APENDIX

### INTERVIEW WITH RODRIGO REY ROSA

GUATEMALA CITY, GUATEMALA (JUNE 6, 2012)

Se ve desde tus primeras obras un interés en la psicología, en la forma en cómo funciona la mente...

Son maneras de ver cómo funciona la mente en el vacío, una máquina trabajando sin tracción. Antes de pensar que yo iba a escribir quería estudiar medicina con la idea de estudiar psiquiatría. Pero no con la idea de practicar, sino que porque quería entender el mecanismo mental. Creo que tiene relación con mi deseo de experimentar con las drogas, no como drogas de recreo, sino como experimento que también evidencia cómo funciona la mente, o como malfunciona, y un malfuncionamiento generalmente explica el funcionamiento.

¿Tiene que ver con estados de conciencia?

Sí, yo de adolescente me empezó a interesar mucho, como una preocupación pre-literaria, y luego, siento que es por ahí que entré.

¿Y la experimentación con drogas han ayudado a desarrollar estas preguntas sobre la conciencia?

Creo que siguen prolongando o cambiando el ángulo de la pregunta, la respuesta todavía no aparece.

En *Cárcel de árboles*, está el mundo oral y el mundo de la escritura, que ofrece cierta capacidad de comunicación perdida. ¿Qué te impulsó a pensarlo en forma separado? Todo lo que va surgiendo ahí es una especie de diálogo, nada preconcebido. Sí siento que el lenguaje escrito permite una claridad o precisión que siempre se escapa por otro lado. Yo siento que en ese ejercicio me empezaron a llegar un montón de ideas que yo se las atribuí al personaje. Lo usaba como pretexto para desarrollar la trama. En ese momento me preocupaba la idea de Wittgenstein que no se puede pensar sin lenguaje. Es el epígrafe, pero es punto de partida de toda la historia. El pensamiento está hecho de símbolos, y en el caso del lenguaje humano son símbolos fonéticos o escritos, pero fuera de eso, llevo la tesis de Wittgenstein al extremo. Luego Wittgenstein cambia, piensa que hay un tipo de pensamiento pre-simbólico. Pero lo que se llama el razonamiento lógico no puede funcionar sin el lenguaje. Es una idea muy estimulante. Es un poco la negación de la mística. Wittgenstein en eso tacha la mística de farsa. Creo que luego cambia, concede que puede haber una actividad mental, incluso una especie de comunicación por encima o debajo de los símbolos.

Pensando en *El material humano*, ¿qué función cumple la foto de Asturias y el bautizo de su hijo?

Para mí es una crítica a Asturias, por su doble juego en el coqueteo por la cosa revolucionaria y el poder, el poder ahí emblematizado en un dictador y un obispo cuestionable. Ahora sí, yo pienso que la aproximación del escritor con el poder es muy peligrosa.

¿En qué sentido?

En el sentido maquiavélico. El escritor tiene un lugar más al margen que al centro.

Como observador. Observa mejor desde fuera que desde dentro. Si se pega mucho al poder, tiende a caer en la fuerza de gravedad del poder y perder su autonomía.

¿Autonomía estética?

Ahí se empieza a mezclar todo. Su autonomía existencial. Su autonomía y su libertad intelectual, está comprometido con el poder.

Alguien como Truman Capote...

Ajá, ahí se jodió. Yo siento que fatal para él. Ahí se empieza a corromper. Es un buen ejemplo. Pero Darío también es un ejemplo. Un escritor que yo admiro muchísimo, pero su relación con el poder dieron obras horribles. Su oda a Estrada Cabrera, o a Ubico. Eso es denigrante. Yo creo que el escritor debe ser independiente, y acercarte mucho a gente de poder, a menos de que sea como una especie de espionaje, eso se vale. Pero entonces se tiene que traicionar. Pero los escritores somos un poco traicioneros, en el sentido de que siempre estás pensando en la obra. Hay una especie de doble agente, te volvés una especie de doble agente permanente.

Al principio de *El material humano*, está el epígrafe... ¿Cuál es la necesidad de esa aclaratoria?

Es empezar ese juego. Porque esa obra juega con la verosimilitud y con la confianza que uno establece. Es un poco como minar esa confianza de manera coqueta. Empezar



el juego con esa ambigüedad. En esa obra casi no hay invención, hay ficción en el sentido que cambio los días para ir ordenando el discurso, pero no invento mucho, casi nada, pero no lo considero un testimonio, es una novela. Pero no parece, no? Es una ficción hecha de pedazos de realidad. No hay fabulación. No digo nunca que “fui ahí y no fui”. Todas las entradas del diario son auténticas, a veces cambio las fechas. Digamos, esa foto de Miguel Ángel Asturias no la vi en casa de Menchú. La vi en una exposición en Madrid. La foto existe, la pudo haber tenido el otro.

Y en las fichas...

En las fichas falseé también alguna, le puse el nombre de algún cabrón por joder, o de algún amigo para reírme, por ladrón de gallinas. Pero a eso se limita la ficción, no hay fabulación. Es un juego de espejos.

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