

**Reading *Testimonio* Today:
Central American Literature from 1982 to the Present**

by

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B.A., University of Delhi, 2008

M.A., University of Delhi, 2010

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

(Hispanic Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

March 2019

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Reading Testimonio Today: Central American Literature from 1982 to the Present

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

In Hispanic Studies

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Abstract

This thesis argues that *testimonio* is above all a perspective from which to read a literary text: it is one way (among many) to understand or interpret a text. The thesis investigates the continued validity of this perspective in the twenty-first century, even as the genre of *testimonio* is apparently in decline in today's neoliberal world in which the market governs the production and consumption of literary works. Written and read by would-be revolutionaries and their sympathizers during the resistance to military regimes, *testimonio* helped propagate the belief that the end of the struggle would bring social change. Texts such as *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, *Miguel Mármol*, *Si me permiten hablar*, and others describe the oppression of military rule and outline the dream of forming a peaceful post-war society. However, in many cases post-war settlements brought disappointment and frustration to the people, leading to a new, more cynical ethos in contemporary literature, and the notion that *testimonio* (or any other literary tool) might bring social change came to seem an illusion.

Against this dominant narrative, I read contemporary fiction and film from Central America (specifically, El Salvador and Guatemala) as *testimonio*, with a focus on aspects such as parody, transnationalism, and visuality. Contemporary Fictions such as *El asco*, *Insensatez*, *The Tattooed Soldier*, or *Voces inocentes* are examples that can be read as *testimonio*. Reading literary fiction from the perspective of *testimonio* will bypass much of the unproductive debate that surrounds the genre: the dichotomy between truth and lies, fact and fiction, authenticity and inauthenticity. The *testimonio* genre is trapped in this debate, which occludes the literariness of a text read as *testimonio*, on the one hand, and the testimonial aspects of literary texts, on the other.

Lay Summary

This dissertation revives the testimonial reading strategy in Central American literature.

Testimonio, a Latin American genre, was canonized in the seventies and eighties but thought to be exhausted with the end of the region's civil wars and dictatorships. However, we see testimonial elements in narratives from Central America today, though the concerns are different in the post-war period. Contemporary fiction from the region addresses issues such as migration and post-war disillusion, and explores memory remind us of a past that is still unresolved. This study examines these features and reads them as *testimonio* in the twenty-first century.

Preface

This dissertation is an original, unpublished, and independent work conducted by Upasana Thakkar.

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Acknowledgements

This long journey of writing my dissertation would have been neither possible nor enjoyable, had it not been for the following people:

Dr. Jon Beasley-Murray, my supervisor, who showed faith in me and motivated me throughout. Our discussions in Caffe Mira helped me to develop and strengthen not only my ideas but also my self-confidence. I am extremely grateful for his consistent and constructive feedback on my chapters, as well as encouragement on matters such as getting published and presenting conference papers. This dissertation would not have been the same without his guidance.

I am also greatly indebted to committee members Dr. Kim Beauchesne and Dr. Alessandra Santos, for their valuable comments and suggestions on the thesis. They have always been very kind, be it in terms of their interest in the subject matter or in scheduling face-to-face meetings for discussion, each time I requested.

A big thank you also goes out to Dr. Alexandra Ortiz Wallner and Dr. Vijaya Venkataraman for providing me the initial impetus to work on Central American literature. It was under the supervision of the latter that I first ventured into this area during my university years in India. She has continued to take a keen interest in my work and provide encouragement.

I also wish to thank the French, Hispanic and Italian Studies department for providing me scholarships and Teaching Assistantships, and I am grateful to the many faculty, staff, and the many past and present graduate students who have provided practical and moral support, including, but not limited to, Enrique Manchón, Carole, Emanuela, Marjo, Michael, Yasaman and Esmeralda. My heartfelt appreciation to my peers Karen and Charu for their pleasant

company during some much-needed breaks to overcome the stress that is part of the writing process. Thank you for believing in my work and helping with the edition.

Lastly, I wouldn't have had the courage to embark on this journey without the loving presence and emotional support of Vipin, Ahaan, Ma, Baba and my in-laws, all of whom have always been there for me.

Introduction

This thesis explores post-civil-war Central American fiction (specifically from El Salvador and Guatemala) in the context of the *testimonio* tradition.¹ In the following chapters, through the analysis of a series of testimonial and fictional texts, we will see that, despite the peace agreements that put an end to armed conflict in the region,² problems like violence and oppression (as portrayed in Central American narratives themselves) have not died out, but continue, alongside new social issues such as migration from the region to the United States. Arturo Arias, in *Taking their Word*, argues the need to recognize Central America—and its literature—as different from the rest of Latin America. He notes, for instance, that the civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s led to increased numbers of Central Americans in the United States, and thus it is important to read literature from the region that examines such themes and raises issues related to their effects on the USA: “When we consider Central American discursivity, ... there is now a pragmatic need to study it if we are interested in creating or maintaining a dynamic understanding of a culture that is contributing to the ever-changing landscapes of culture and identity in the United States itself” (xii). Yet we should study Central American literature not only in terms of its impact on the United States, but also to understand the dynamics of post-civil-war Central American countries themselves. It is also important to study how Central

¹ There are of course differences between the various Central American countries. There are also distinctions between the forms of conflict they have experienced. On the one hand, for instance, El Salvador is known for “the more conventionally Marxist form of a conflict between bourgeoisie and working class, and capitalist and socialist models of national development” (Beverley and Zimmerman 115); on the other, in Guatemala “a majority or close to a majority of the population of Guatemala is made up of non-Spanish-speaking Indian peoples. (Beverley and Zimmerman 145). But their literary traditions, in particular, are similar enough—with many writers, such as the Nicaraguan poet and testimonialist Claribel Alegría and the Salvadoran novelist Horacio Castellanos Moya taking up residence in neighbouring countries—that this dissertation stresses continuities rather than differences.

² In El Salvador, the peace agreement was signed in 1992, and in Guatemala, 1996. However, many critics such as Alexandra Ortiz Wallner and Arturo Arias (in *El arte de fictionar* and *Taking Their Word*, respectively) note that effectively the peace process in the region began in the late eighties, and accelerated after the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Government in the 1990.

America is coping with the results of the brutal civil wars that still mark the region, thirty or more years on.

Though Central America has always contributed to the literary tradition of the hemisphere (for instance, one of the leading lights of *modernismo* at the turn of the twentieth century was the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío), the region has rarely been studied in its own right. Arias notes that “Central America has been the invisible hinge between North and South, with the brief exception of the 1980s, when political scientists paid attention to its revolutionary struggles before moving on to world systems theories” (xvii). A focus on Central American literature is needed to hear the diverse voices from the region, all the more so now that the civil wars are at an end. We need to ask whether the peace agreements of the late 1980s and 1990s really addressed the region’s problems. Is it possible that the region has settled accounts with the traumatic memory inflicted by the war? What is the role of memory today? How do Central Americans deal with the past and the present? It is through Central American literature (among other cultural expressions) that we are able to understand the state of the region today. This dissertation reads the work of authors such as Dante Liano, Horacio Castellanos Moya, and Rodrigo Rey Rosas so as to explore the issues Central American societies face now. These authors raise their voices against the ongoing violence and injustices within the region; others, such as Héctor Tobar, Mario Bencastro, and Francisco Goldman, depict the life of its immigrants to the United States. They attempt not only to create a dialogue with Central America from outside the isthmus but also to emphasize the struggles of immigrants and how they negotiate their identity in a foreign land.

This thesis is particularly concerned with demarcating the continued impact of *testimonio* on contemporary literature. It examines first the canonization of *testimonio* as a genre during the

1980s, at the time of guerrilla insurrection and state terror, as critics thought that literary texts such as novels were no longer able to capture the diversity of voices from the region. *Testimonio* was understood in terms of revolution, the left, and subaltern resistance to oppressive dictatorial regimes. *Testimonio* became the new topic of discussion from the South in North American academia; this discussion welcomed the style and prioritized it over traditional literary genres. In fact, there was sustained comparison between literature and *testimonio* and an attempt to show not only the differences between the two but also to question the former and champion the latter. For instance, George Yúdice argued that “testimonial writing thus fits into and contributes to the ongoing challenge to the literary, which is no longer understood simply as an autonomous cultural activity conditioned by social and political factors” (“Testimonio and Postmodernism” 47). Yúdice explains that *testimonio*, as a voice from the margin, does not merely offer different kinds of narrative to its readers but also challenges the institution of literary studies. Critics such as John Beverley sought to establish a genealogy for *testimonio* that would predate the genre’s canonization and establish it as a strain running through Latin American letters from the conquest; yet, it was only in the eighties, after it was approved by the North, that *testimonio* came to be recognized and celebrated in the South as well.

Testimonio was as much as anything an outgrowth of the flourishing of identity politics, such as second-wave feminism or the civil rights movement, that began in the 1960s in the United States, as many testimonial texts had female narrators recounting their stories of resistance and their contributions to the struggle against oppression in Central America. Margaret Randall indicates: “A new practice of listening and telling is sometimes called oral history. Sometimes it’s called testimony, or testimonial journalism. Some people refer to it more simply as in-depth interviewing. Whatever the label, it has created a body of voice and image, a new

resource literature—much of it from the so-called Third World and much of it from and about women” (“Reclaiming Voices” 61). Barbara Harlow also argued for the importance of *testimonio* over literature: “Rather than acting as gatekeepers to the halls of learning authors and other ‘professionals,’ often the ‘traditional intellectuals’ in the Gramscian sense of the term, become instead amanuenses in a new collaborative project enabling the ‘voices of the dispossessed’ to penetrate international media circuits and information networks” (“Testimonio and Survival” 72). John Beverley even entitled an entire book, much of which was concerned with *testimonio*, “Against Literature.” Thus, in this discussion a series of binaries was established whereby *testimonio* (associated with the subaltern, the real, and the new left) was poised against and in contrast to literature (linked to the middle or even upper classes, fiction, and an outdated politics); critics were busy manifesting not only the importance of reading *testimonio* but also demonstrating the downfall of literature and everything that supposedly went with it.

However, with the end of the region’s civil wars, and as a new geopolitical scenario opened up in the twenty-first century, *testimonio* was, relatively suddenly, declared dead. In Georg M. Gugelberger’s words: “Obviously the euphoric ‘moment’ of the testimonio has passed” (“Testimonial Discourse and Beyond” 1). Gugelberger adds in his “Introduction” to the collection of essays *The Real Thing*, devoted to the genre, that “The publication of this collection clearly comes at a time when the initial interest in the genre has begun to fade, perhaps due to the developments since 1989 that took down the wall between an outdated binary” (7). This assessment is borne out by an analysis of the MLA database, which shows a significant drop in the number of book and journal articles containing the word *testimonio* in their title published between the years 2010 and 2018, as compared to the period 1990 to 2000: there were 15 book articles and 19 academic journal articles of this kind produced between in the earlier decade,

compared to 3 and 11, respectively, in the latter. Hence, a literary genre that was promoted in the early eighties and nineties as a means to bring a change in the literary world “beg[a]n to fade” due to “developments” (locally, the end of authoritarian regimes in South America, and the signing of peace agreements in Central America; internationally, the end of the Cold War) that took place in the 1990s. John Beverley also closes the discussion on *testimonio* by indicating that “the moment of testimonio is over” (“The Real Thing” 77). Thus, by the late 1990s, if North American academia were to be believed, the genre appeared to be dying out. Moreover, today we see critics rejecting the concept of *testimonio* and focusing once again on literature. For example, Werner Mackenbach emphasizes the evolution of “la nueva novela histórica,” which plays with the concept of fiction and reality and does not attempt to construct new truths but highlights the impossibility of constructing truths at all. In the context of a discussion of the Nicaraguan writer Sergio Ramírez’s novel *Castigo divino*, he argues that:

El “contrato de veracidad” del testimonio se disuelve, la auto-ironización por el recurso a un “pseudo-testimonio” en forma paródica articulan aún más el carácter de la novela como una alegoría de la imposibilidad de construcciones de una verdad histórica. Se cuestionan no solamente los clichés de un realismo burgués, sino también y explícitamente el paradigma realista del discurso literario revolucionario *par excellence*, que en el testimonio veía una forma posburguesa de representación cultural, caracterizada por un supuesto grado más alto de veracidad. (“La historia como pretexto de literatura” 186)

Alexandra Ortiz Wallner also argues that the return to fiction “o, como lo he propuesto con las palabras de Horacio Castellanos Moya, en una recuperación del arte de ficcionar” can bring the different binaries (fiction and reality, for instance) together in one text and under one heading (*El*

arte de ficcionar 260-261). She adds that it is in novels where one can find historical, testimonial, and fictional elements. Thus, there is now a shift in focus towards fiction among critics of Central American cultural production. Both Mackenbach and Ortiz Wallner state that the novel is the form that best incorporates diverse perspectives (testimonial, autobiographical, historical, and fictional) and challenges the notion of truth and authenticity; thus, rejecting *testimonio* and privileging literature once again.

Mario Roberto Morales, in *La articulación de las diferencias* (1998), gives this argument a twist when he states that (in the case he is studying) Guatemala and its literature are all about *mestizos*, and that there is no literature in Guatemala that is untouched by hybridity or mixture. Those who insist on the existence of some notionally pure indigenous literature do so, he argues, for ideological purposes. He concludes therefore that there are no binaries between literature and *testimonio* and that every work is a work of fiction. He defends literature as a means by which to represent subaltern voices: “La defensa de la literatura como medio adecuado para representar a la subalternidad, así como la validez del operativo vanguardista en esta empresa, han quedado ilustrados, espero que suficientemente, en las líneas anteriores” (15). He states that novels such as those by Nobel prize winner Miguel Ángel Asturias (a canonical figure if ever there was one) are the texts that best represent indigenous subalternity and *mestizos* alike in Guatemala. He, further, adds that a *testimonio* such as the iconic text authored by the Guatemalan indigenous woman Rigoberta Menchú, is as much of a fiction as any of Asturias’s novels, particularly *Hombres de maíz*, are testimonial. As he puts it: “*Hombres de maíz*, pues, es también testimonial en un sentido amplio, como el testimonio de Menchú es, también en un sentido amplio, ficción” (34). Morales interchanges the position of literature and *testimonio* associated with the texts *Hombres de maíz* and *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* and challenges the fixed notion of viewing

these texts within the genre in which they were categorized. This interchange of position between literature and *testimonio*, however, shows various ways of not only approaching *testimonio* but also fiction. And such, indeed, is the argument of this thesis.

Most Central American writers themselves might beg to differ with the assessment that the moment of *testimonio* is conclusively at an end. For this thesis also shows that *testimonio* is far from forgotten among those currently engaged in the task of narrating post-civil-war Central America. They may be writing fiction, but they have hardly left *testimonio* behind. If we refuse to see the connections between literature and *testimonio*, insisting on the distance between the two, whichever we privilege the effect is inevitably to restrict both from achieving their true potential. Therefore, this thesis explores the literary elements in *testimonio* and testimonial elements in contemporary Central American fiction to demonstrate the powerful heterogeneity in the region's narrative production since the 1980s. Morales's conclusion is that *testimonio* is superseded by a "mestizo fiction" that cannot be classified neither as literature nor as *testimonio*: "Ambos pueden reclamar con justeza y orgullo ser versiones ficcionales (y, por ello, reales) de la identidad múltiplemente mestiza de Guatemala, articuladas desde posicionalidades contrarias y—digo yo—complementarias" (38). I sympathize with this refusal of the binaries that bedevil the reading of *testimonio* (and impoverish our understanding of literary fiction) but believe that this assumption of a mestizo literature still simplifies the complexity and variety of the region's texts and aesthetico-political projects under a unified and homogeneous body of mestizo narrative. Instead of focusing on the multiple ways in which any one text can be read, such a strategy homogenizes post-civil war narrative under the single category of novel or "mestizo fiction."

Abraham Acosta questions Morales's argument for "mestizo fiction" and his downplaying of *testimonio* as a distinct form of reading. Acosta observes that "Morales advances what he calls a defense of literature [and he] aims for a 'recentering' of fiction and the literary vanguard in the Guatemalan national culture" (6). He develops his argument through a reading of Salvadoran novelist Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*, which, he suggests:

merely recenters *testimonio* and mestizo fiction together as the only two options available to narrate contemporary Guatemalan critical realities. ... The appeal to logos which underwrites *Insensatez* itself is one derived from rather traditional uncomplicated critiques of the genre, like Morales's, and effectively forecloses the possibility of overcoming these contradictions in any truly meaningful way (real: *neither* *testimonio* nor mestizo fiction). ("Of Failed Retreats" 16)

Acosta criticizes Morales's claims for "mestizo fiction" as opposed to *testimonio*, and he emphasizes that these problems derive from the fact that critics discuss such notions so "uncomplicated[ly]" that it is impossible to understand them "in a meaningful way." In line with Acosta's argument, then, this research aims to retain the "complications" of Central American "critical realities" by problematizing the ways in which we perceive fiction and *testimonio* alike. We need to revise our definitions of *testimonio* so that we can take proper account of the issues facing Central American societies as they are expressed in contemporary narrative. Hence, I try to return attention to post-civil-war Central America and at the same time show how the region's literary texts question any overwrought distinction between *testimonio* and fiction.

In short, I do not wish to champion literature over *testimonio* or fiction over authentic narrative, any more than I wish to repeat the mistake of the critical celebration of the real that attended so many discussions of *testimonio* in the genre's heyday. Rather, I attempt to see

whether the Central American texts that I analyze in my dissertation can be read differently by different readers. I choose fiction, which bypasses the binaries of truth and lies, fiction or real stories as argued by the critics, to see if it has testimonial elements in it. However, by testimonial elements I am not referring simply to the well-worn traits that usually feature in such discussions—the genre’s supposed associations with veracity, authenticity, and resistance, important though these may be—but look for elements beyond them. I attend therefore to other aspects, present in *testimonio* but often overlooked by its readers: transnationalism, suspense, thrill, humor, and the treatment of life *before* trauma hits. I trace these features in classic *testimonios* from the region and beyond (from *Operación masacre* to *Miguel Mármol*) with the aim of reviving our readings of *testimonio* (and *testimonio* as itself a reading strategy) as well as exploring how literary fiction, too, can be read differently once we recognize not only literary aspects in *testimonio* but also testimonial aspects in literature.

None of this is to suggest that reading contemporary fictions as *testimonio* is the only way to approach these texts. *Testimonio* is one of many possible models or approaches. For example, critics have read novels such as Castellanos Moya’s *Insensatez* and Rey Rosa’s *El material humano* in terms of the relatively new category of “autofiction.” Marileen La Haije, for instance, cites Manuel Alberca’s definition of autofiction to relate it to the reading of *Insensatez* and *El material humano* (“Narration and Madness”). According to Alberca, as cited by La Haije, an autofiction is “a fictional narrative with an autobiographical appearance (confirmed by the (nominal) identification between the author, the narrator and the protagonist), that generates an ambiguous reading pact” (146). La Haije argues accordingly that “in both *Insensatez* and *El material humano* a series of paratextual elements can be distinguished which facilitate an ambiguous reading, vacillating between a referential-autobiographical one and a more fictional

one. That is, the narrative ‘I’ is and is not the author of the book itself’ (146). Thus La Haije approaches this ambiguity of narrative voice, between reference and invention, in contemporary Central American fiction as autofiction, whereas I look at it from the perspective of *testimonio*. In turn, critics have also discussed the ways in which *testimonio* itself overlaps with other literary genre such as autobiography or oral history. There are no clear boundaries between these reading strategies. The advantage, however, of stressing the continuity of (specifically) *testimonio*, from the twentieth century to the present, is that it enables us to draw on political impulses and critical debates that are otherwise imperiled.

This research, then, sets out first to broaden our understanding of *testimonio*, refusing to confine our definition of the genre to overdetermined factors such as solidarity, struggle, or verisimilitude; and, second, to show that *testimonio* as a form of reading still can and should exist in parallel to fiction. I read fiction in testimonial terms, and *testimonio* with a literary sensibility, so that we can keep the complexity of these texts alive. As soon as we categorize them as *either* fiction *or* *testimonio*, we simplify the stories they tell and the issues they address.

My approach in this thesis is comparative. I examine two sets of texts—classic *testimonio* and post-war Central American fiction—that are not often read together, with the idea that each sheds new light on the other. In other words, I read contemporary fiction through a lens provided by *testimonio*, and I read *testimonio* through the lens of fiction. This comparative methodology allows us to see, on the one hand, testimonial aspects in fiction, such as a concern with historical events and social trauma, or formal devices such as the use of dialogic structures mediating subaltern voices. On the other hand, a comparative approach also brings to light elements in classic *testimonio* that we more commonly associate with fiction, even genre fiction such as detective stories or mysteries. In other words, while *testimonio* and fiction have often been

understood to be diametrically opposed—and indeed, the very definition of *testimonio* as a genre sought to distinguish it from literary fiction—a comparative methodology shows the benefits of seeing generic difference instead in terms of reading strategies. We have too often read *testimonio* and fiction in separate ways, with very different expectations, thus seeing only referentiality and “truth” in *testimonio*, and suspense or narrative thrill in fiction. This, however, is to ignore the overlaps and continuities between these sets of texts. My comparative approach opens up a dialogue between the two genres that also shows that *testimonio* has not exactly disappeared: it has been taken up by more recent texts commonly regarded as “merely” fictional, and it provides a strategy for reading them in new and perhaps unexpected ways.

In chapter one, “The Testimonial Debate and Reading *Testimonio* Today,” I discuss the historical context in which *testimonio* came into being and trace its trajectory until the beginning of the twenty-first century. I focus on neoliberalism and its tendency to appropriate the subversive forms and survival strategies employed by the subaltern, the need to find other ways to communicate ongoing social inequalities and injustices. In the second chapter, “Contemporary Central American Fictions,” I ask whether parody functions as a new subversive narrative strategy in the texts written in the twenty-first century that are read from the testimonial perspective. I analyze fictions such as *El asco* and *Insensatez* by Castellanos Moya and *El hombre de Montserrat* by Dante Liano. We see that parody not just connects the classic *testimonios* with the contemporary texts (read as *testimonio*) but also critique the same past which is set as the background of these present-day narratives.

In chapter three, “Migrant Tales from Central America to the United States,” I argue that the *testimonio* is no longer restricted to Latin American countries, but has travelled to other parts of the world, especially to the United States with the increase of Latin American immigrants.

Testimonio as an interpretive technique now addresses immigration and related issues in contemporary Central American narratives. Yet transnationalism in testimonial readings is not new but can be found in classic *testimonios* too. Thus, there is a continuity of aspects that were overlooked in the earlier readings, but as we will see that there are differences also, particularly as these present-day texts are set after the civil wars. In chapter four, “Memory Haunts the Present,” I explore the notion that the testimonial perspective is not restricted to written texts but can also be found in visual forms, such as films and documentaries, in which memory is an important tool. But the role of memory differs in every creative form. Films such as *Voces inocentes* and documentaries such as *La isla* are examples of the varied role of memory. I also look at texts such as *El material humano* by Rodrigo Rey Rosa, where memory again has a distinct role to play. This chapter explores memory not simply to narrate traumatic experiences but also to demonstrate a life before the violence. Besides, we explore other elements of memory that were seldom discussed in earlier readings of *testimonio*—such as suspense and thrill.

My conclusion returns to my initial hypothesis and research questions. I address the question of whether *testimonio* fulfils its role as a mode to approach literary texts in Central America in the twenty-first century, i.e. if it is a reading strategy, not a narrative strategy. In fact, *testimonio* has always been a way of reading texts and that is how it was canonized as a genre in the eighties. We shall see throughout the dissertation that it was the canonization of *testimonio* as a genre that later created controversy around testimonial texts. But if we consider *testimonio* as a reading strategy—an approach we can choose to take up across a range of different narratives—we may bypass the binaries between truth and lies and fiction and *testimonio*. We will see testimonial aspects in fiction and fictional aspects in *testimonios*. This is a choice then that this study hopes to open up: the option to read contemporary Central American literary texts as

testimonio and classic *testimonios* from the perspective of literature. I end then with the hope that this option for *testimonio* might find a place not only in Central America or in Latin America, but also elsewhere. Because of its flexibility, and so long as we refuse to restrict it to a particular time or place, *testimonio* can adapt to a multitude of distinct social situations now and in the future, and can create a bond or connection, a protest against injustice and a voice for liberation, across the postcolonial world.

Chapter One: The Testimonial Debate and Reading Testimonio Today

1.1 Introduction

What is *testimonio*? What is its relationship to the literary canon? What is its history, and why might it be important to revive the genre today? This chapter tries to answer these questions. It analyses the emergence of *testimonio* during the 1980s and 1990s, exploring and questioning the reasons behind the interest in the genre in North American academia at the time. What did testimonial books offer their readers that novels and poetry did not? Why did narratives from the margin attract attention? Further, I discuss the various ways in which *testimonio* was defined and the reasons why critical readings of *testimonio* approached it from diverse perspectives. We will also see how the testimonial genre provoked debate and controversy and lastly, how with the end of the Southern Cone dictatorships and Central American civil wars, it seemed as though the genre abruptly came to a halt.

In this chapter, I look at the kinds of stories *testimonio* narrated that invigorated the literature of “colonial and neocolonial structures of domination and privilege” (Beverley and Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics* x). But beyond addressing the general legacy of colonial injustice, *testimonio* came to the fore specifically at a time of civil wars and dictatorships in Latin America. Indeed, societies in both Latin and North America found themselves increasingly polarized, divided between left and right ideologies. John Beverley stresses the emergence of new kinds of literary production “after the crisis year of 1973, which marks the end of the sixties and the increasing power of the right in both Latin America and the United States” (*Against Literature* 112). In Latin America, on the one hand there was state oppression, on the other there was the rise of guerrilla movements (often inspired by the example of the Cuban revolution) that fought and raised voices against injustice. Latin American revolutionary movements saw the

involvement of both elite and the masses. However, the narrative of the popular class, of their struggle and participation in the process, was not (it was felt) depicted authentically in the stories narrated by upper-class or elite authors that characterized the so-called Latin American “Boom,” and thus *testimonio* came to be seen as a form of narration that captured the voice of the subaltern, created by the subaltern. These narratives stood out as they are not represented by the upper-class authors; they express the subaltern struggle and their role in the fight against oppression. They challenge not only the literary strategies of the elite (for instance, the novel form), which was the predominant form of storytelling at that time, but also its culture.

Yet just a few decades later, with the end of Latin American civil wars and dictatorships, we have allegedly witnessed the end of *testimonio* as a genre: in Beverley’s words, “the moment of testimonio is over” (*Testimonio* 77). Beverley not only mentions how the genre came to an end, but he even suggests that any lingering attachment to the genre has become an obstacle when he claims that *testimonios* “have become a nostalgia; that new forms of political imagination and organization are needed; that, as in everything else in life, we have to move on” (“The Real Thing” 78). Even at the best of times, Beverley was already arguing that “testimonio is a *transitional* cultural form appropriate to processes of social upheaval, but also destined to give way to different forms of representation as these processes move to other stages and the human collectivities that are their agents come into possession of (or lose) new forms of power and knowledge” (“The Politics of Latin American Postmodernism” 105). My argument, by contrast, is that critics perhaps “move[d] on” all too quickly; and that it is worth investigating what lingers of the testimonial impulse. Therefore, this chapter also investigates the debates around *testimonio* that prompted controversy, at the same time as it sets the stage for a new approach to both classic testimonial texts and, by extension, also more recent narratives that are

more usually categorized as fiction. We will thus see in this chapter how *testimonio* emerged first and foremost as a reading strategy, then how the definitions in the 1980s and 1990s categorized it (instead) as a genre, and how the controversies that was generated around Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio*, as well the historical context of the end of the Cold War with which the testimonial genre supposedly came to an end. Though academic discussion and debates about *testimonio* may have waned, my ultimate argument is that contemporary Central American fiction often invite a testimonial, and the chapters that follow this one will develop this argument in detail.

1.2 Testimonio's Emergence as a Genre

When did the genre emerge? In what social and political circumstances did it evolve? What were its primary characteristics? And what role did it serve in the literary world? For some, *testimonio* can be traced back to the colonial period. The earliest texts that would later be counted as *testimonio* appeared in the sixteenth century in the form of chronicles or non-fictional first-person narrative accounts that tell the experience of the soldiers or clergymen who came to the New World with the *conquistadores*. More broadly sketching an entire literary tradition read through *testimonio*, Beverley states that “the roots of *testimonio* go back to the importance in previous Latin American literature of a series of nonfictional narrative texts such as the colonial *crónicas*, the *costumbrista* essay ..., the war diaries ... of, for example, Bolívar or Martí, or the Romantic biography, a key genre of Latin American liberalism” (“The Margin at the Center” 25). But testimonial readings also drew on other disciplines, notably anthropology and ethnography, which gave renewed impetus to the search for texts through which readers might gain access to a subaltern voice, a voice from the margin and by the marginalized, especially the urban poor and indigenous peasants.

Select twentieth-century texts would also be interpreted as *testimonio*: Ricardo Poza's *Juan Pérez Jolote: Biografía de un tzotzil* (1952) and Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación masacre* (1957), published in Mexico and Argentina respectively, are examples from the 1950s. Other early texts that became canonized as foundation for the testimonial tradition include (from Cuba) Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) and *Canción de Rachel* (1967) or (again, from Mexico) Elena Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlatelolco: testimonios de historia oral* (1971). But it was in the late 1970s and early 1980s that texts named as *testimonios* truly flourished. In South America, above all the Southern Cone, this was a time of dirty wars and state violence. Central American countries also faced military repression and civil war, as this period saw the rise of guerrilla movements and other forms of resistance against oppression. For Guatemala, Rigoberta Menchú's astonishingly successful *testimonio Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) became a generic ideal type as it drew international attention both to the ongoing genocide carried out by a succession of military dictatorships and also to peasants' growing (and increasingly organized) resistance. Texts regarded as *testimonios* in this period were a reflection on the social situation in these countries and the struggles against oppression by ordinary people. Narratives similar to Menchú's could be found in (for Nicaragua) *Sandino's Daughters* by Margaret Randall (1981) or Omar Cabezas's *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* (1985), and (for El Salvador) in Roque Dalton's *Miguel Mármol* (1982), all of which emerged in the context of war and state violence. Texts identified as *testimonio* during this time generally narrated stories in the first person to an editor or compiler and dealt with a specific community, its people, and their resistance to military oppression.

Testimonio became a voice for the subaltern resisting atrocities committed by the state. The rise of *testimonio* as a narrative form was understood in terms of the effort to "reconstruct

these struggles as stories of individual and collective change” (Beverley and Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics* 172). *Testimonio* projected the masses against the dictators and their oppression; it was a ray of hope for a just society. In academia too, the nascent genre offered an alternative to the habit of making authors the centre of attention and seemed to offer new paths for our understanding of how texts might work. Hence Beverley and Zimmerman excitedly declared that “testimonio involves an erasure or attenuation of the role and thus also of the textual presence of the author, which by contrast is so powerfully present in all major forms of European writing since the Renaissance, so much so that our very notions of literature and the literary are bound up with notions of the author or at least of an authorial intention” (175). It challenged the structure of novels, still tied to the notion of a creative genius, as it was a narrative created in collaboration between two people and thus, perhaps, more accessible to a larger audience. Doris Sommer states: “novels seem unobliging today, given the sheer intellectual difficulty of important Latin American fiction since the ‘boom’ of the 1960s and 1970s. Testimonials promise more warmth” (“No Secrets” 132). *Testimonio* was thus perceived as a form of narration that might challenge, critique, and overthrow social and literary hierarchies alike.

The prevailing model for literary fiction in Latin America had, as Sommer notes, been set by the so-called “Boom” and (mostly male) authors such as the Mexican Carlos Fuentes or the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, who had become global cultural superstars. But most such Boom writers belonged to a certain class of the society; their role was increasingly felt “to establish standards of taste within the public sphere excluding others” (Yúdice, “Testimonio and Postmodernism” 47). George Yúdice states that literature did not allow just anyone to narrate their tales, but only “certain classes of individuals”: writers like “Neruda or Gabriel García

Márquez, trained within the institution, have had no trouble performing in the literary sphere”; others, however, were “deemed nonliterary” and “assigned to the genres of other disciplines—oral history, ethnography, and so on—or to substandard discursive forms—folktale, gossip, legend, and so on” (47). Testimonial narrative came to be regarded as a more democratic alternative to the Boom, a solution to an otherwise widespread disillusion with literature. Critics tried hard to distinguish *testimonio* from literature and to understand it in other terms. Beverley, for instance, argued that “testimonio-like texts have existed for a long time at the margin of literature, representing in particular those subjects—the child, the ‘native’, the woman, the insane, the criminal, the proletarian—excluded from authorized representation when it was a question of speaking and writing for themselves” (“The Margin at the Center” 25). Elzbieta Sklodowska also suggests that “some rarely explored islands of Spanish American letters, such as women’s writing, subaltern autobiography, and minority experience, have come to be evaluated with ‘*testimonio*-seeing’ eyes” (“Spanish American Testimonial Novel” 84). But increasingly *testimonio* was defined not simply as a complement to literature, or as a way to make literature more inclusive, but as actively opposed to it: *testimonio* was not only different from fiction; it was also more grounded, more real and true.

It is not as though, however, the Boom had been apolitical. Initially it had been very much associated with the Cuban revolution: the ideology of revolution, the hope of an equal society and relating oneself with the leftist government became a norm of the Boom writers. However, the Padilla affair³ led to a disappointment among intellectuals with the Cuban

³ Heberto Padilla was a Cuban poet who initially supported Fidel Castro’s revolution and the movement to overthrow the dictator, Fulgencio Batista. However, gradually he began to look at the revolution more sceptically as Castro instructed intellectuals to write towards the success of the revolution. “Writers were warned as early as 1961 that their efforts should be directed towards supporting the revolution— ‘with the revolution, everything; against the revolution, nothing’ was Castro’s stark definition of their responsibilities.” Further, the award that Padilla received

government and its ideology; many of the “world’s intellectuals officially broke with the Cuban Revolution.”⁴ So Cuba turned to other forms of international cultural production, as the influential Casa de las Américas instituted a prize for best *testimonio*. George Yúdice mentions that the innovation of this award came only after this rupture with so many Latin American intellectuals: “It is significant . . . that the prize was instituted after the break with liberal Latin American intellectuals over the ‘hardening’ of the Soviet line of the Cuban government. This was clearly a contestatory and a positive move on the part of the Cubans, for with it they helped erode the ‘boom’ canon, which cultivated self-referentiality, simulation, and poststructuralist *écriture*” (Yúdice 54). Thus, the Padilla affair also contributed to the decline of the Boom and the search for other forms of engaged narrative commitment.

As optimism around the Boom faded, the inauguration of the Casa de las Américas award for *testimonio* popularized and helped to define the newly identified genre. As Elzbieta Sklodowska puts it: “la descripción de la categoría testimonial en las bases del Concurso Casa de las Américas (1970) funciona como una partida oficial de nacimiento del testimonio latinoamericano” (*Testimonio hispanoamericano* 56). At the same time, as Sklodowska further states, the terms in which the award was framed also muddied the waters somewhat and opened up space for further debate:

Al dar vigencia al testimonio como concepto literario, el concurso sancionó un fenómeno ya existente . . . , pero no logró calificar el estatuto genérico del mismo ni convertirlo en un concepto crítico operante. Al contrario, por no haberse limitado a testimonios

for his poem where he looked at the revolution critically led to his being put under house arrest and later to be forcefully presented in front of the writers’ union to “make a public confession of his ‘crimes’ and accuse other writers—including his wife, Belkis Cuza Malé—of harbouring similar ‘counter-revolutionary’ ideas that his predicament became an international scandal”

(<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2000/oct/14/guardianobituaries.cuba>).

⁴ <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=42423>

mediatizados, la “definición” difundida a través de Casa de las Américas contribuyó al desdibujamiento del término original barnetiano de “novela-testimonio.” (57)

Thus, though *testimonio* had its own history—it did not exactly emerge from nowhere—the regional political (and indeed, hemispheric and global) situation marked the way in which it suddenly came to the attention of a new set of readers and critics, providing it with a very particular importance. Sklodowska notes that the formula employed by Miguel Barnet had been “novela-testimonio,” a phrase that suggests the continuities between the literary and the testimonial. But there were conjunctural, political reasons why this continuity should be downplayed, and why *testimonio* should be cast as (sometimes, radically) distinct from the novel by those who wished to underline the politics and the kinds of narratives that circulated in Latin as well as in North America.

Testimonio, thus, emerged not only at the height of a widespread struggle against state violence and terror in Latin America, but also at a specific place and time at which there was a need in the society to express oneself or a need to hear and read stories cast as authentic and politically engaged. Therefore, *testimonio* gained momentum as a form of narrative distinct from fiction and ratified as supposedly more politically efficacious than the novels of the Boom. Many characteristics were presented as making *testimonio* distinct from Boom, but above all it was the fact that it put to the forefront narratives of women and indigenous people struggling against oppression. *Testimonio* told different stories, which challenged official narratives and focused more on subaltern lives and their struggle, unlike the narratives of the Boom which tended to be male-oriented and influenced by modernist, mostly European, writers. Beverley and Zimmerman cite Ileana Rodríguez, who points out that *testimonio* provides “access to situations and forms of thought unknown or poorly understood by officially sanctioned culture” (172). There was a felt

need for an alternative form of narrative that would bridge the gap between the elite and the people, that could challenge hegemony and “displace or overthrow both elites and elite cultural modes ... in favor of a more informal and popularly inflected culture” (172). *Testimonio* was not only seen as challenging the literary practices of Latin America by turning attention towards popular and subaltern narratives, but it was also understood as a challenge to elite culture as a whole; in other words, it shook the Centre.

Though *testimonio* was a phenomenon that touched much of Latin America (Cuba, the Southern Cone, and Mexico, for instance), it emerged in particular ways in Central America. For it did not come into existence in the same way all over the region at the same time. For instance, clarifying the differences between *testimonio* in Cuba and in Central America, Sklodowska points out that “mientras que el testimonio forma parte del proyecto discursivo fomentado por la revolución cubana ‘desde el poder,’ en los países centroamericanos llega a desarrollarse sin apoyo institucional” (57). *Testimonio* in Central America was an especially important platform to voice popular stories since literature there was mostly a matter of the elites and the upper class—even more though than in (say) Argentina or Mexico, where literacy and education rates were much higher. Beverley and Zimmerman observed at the time that “literature as a social practice remains in Central America very much bound up with colonial and neocolonial structures of domination and privilege” (x). They further note the class divisions in Central American society, the literacy rate within the population and thus the type of narratives produced from that society: “Less than a majority of the population of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala is functionally literate; moreover, the distinction between the even smaller minority of persons who actually write and/or read literature and those who do not corresponds to deep class and, especially in the case of Guatemala, ethnic divisions” (x). *Testimonio* was therefore perceived as especially

distinct from existing Central American narratives, and it was felt to be particularly pressing as it was a voice from margins that had barely had access to representation.

As for the political impact of *testimonio* in Central America, Beverley and Zimmerman cite Ileana Rodríguez's contention that "Central American testimonial literature is an important component of the study of popular insurgency in the region" (*Literature and Politics* 172). Indeed, like the insurgencies themselves (which often drew on prior models, such as Sandino's rebellion in Nicaragua, or El Salvador's would-be Communist uprising), Central American *testimonio* might date, or be dated, back to the 1930s, but it did not come to international attention until the struggle's subsequent renewal thirty or more years later. As Beverley and Zimmerman suggest: "testimonio begins to flourish in Central America only in the course of the revolutionary process itself, and then to an extent in the 1960s as a Cuban import, through the contacts of Carlos Fonseca, Roque Dalton, and other Central American writers and journalists with Casa de las Américas and the Cuban writers" (179). Note again how the aesthetic is here tied, if not subordinated, to the political: phrases such as "popular insurgency" and "revolutionary processes" were key among critics who discussed *testimonio*. In terms of this repoliticization and rejuvenation of the genre, Margaret Randall played an important role not only in developing this form in Cuba during the 1970s but also in Central America specifically in Nicaragua "under the auspices of Cardenal's Ministry of Culture between 1979 and 1985" (179).

So Central American *testimonio* had a dual foundation. To some extent it arrived, fully armed with a definition and purported political role, from Cuba. Yet it could also be traced back to the 1930s and 1940s in the form of anti-imperialist novels "like Hernán Robleto's *Sangre en el trópico* (1930) in Nicaragua, Luis Carlos Fallas's *Mamita Yunai* (1941) in Costa Rica" (Randall 179). In El Salvador at the same period, the poetry of Gilberto González Contreras shows some

resemblances to what would come to be called *testimonio* “with its fictionalized voices of Indians, peasants, and workers” (189). Again then, something like *testimonio* did not simply emerge suddenly in Latin and Central American literature: attempts to document social reality, to channel subaltern voices, and to show solidarity with struggles against oppression in narrative form can be traced back a long way. But *testimonio* came into focus and became a particular way of reading at the moment of a crisis of representation, as the then-dominant narrative structure could not (it was felt) adequately represent the political and social conditions of the region. *Testimonio* became a source of hope in Central and Latin American literature, a genre that purportedly could pose questions to the existing social norms, a genre that people put their faith and belief in as a narrative tool that could unearth the unheard stories of the Latin and Central American revolutions, and a genre that provided a platform for the subaltern to speak, if only it were read right.

1.3 Definitions, Categorizations, and the Role of Testimonio in Academia

As *testimonio* was canonized, it was defined in a variety of ways and this very variety propels us to return to question of its essence—if indeed it can be said to have one. Almost every scholar who studied *testimonio* attempted to define the genre according to their perspective. It soon emerged that there was no universal definition of *testimonio*. Sklodowska, for instance, cites the definition given by the Casa de las Américas:

Documentarán, de fuente directa, un aspecto de la realidad ... Se entiende por fuente directa el conocimiento de los hechos por el autor, o la recopilación, por este, de relatos o constancias obtenidas de los protagonistas o de testigos idóneos. En ambos casos, es indispensable la documentación fidedigna, que puede ser escrita y/o gráfica. La forma queda a discreción del autor, pero la calidad literaria es también indispensable. (56)

Skłodowska observes that many of these elements came from the work of the anthropologist Miguel Barnet, who was one of the first writers and intellectuals to refer to *testimonio*, even though the term that Barnet himself preferred was “novela-testimonio”: “todas estas formulaciones, derivan, sin embargo, de las premisas ya establecidas por Barnet: protagonista ‘idóneo,’ oralidad, documentación fidedigna, calidad literaria, objetivo reivindicador” (56-57). We thus see a complex mix of perhaps contradictory elements, though it is also worth noting that Barnet (and so, by implication, the Casa de las Américas) emphasized the literary quality expected of *testimonio*.

North American critic John Beverley, who would become perhaps the highest-profile reader of the genre, apparently takes the overlap between *testimonio* and novel to reside mostly in page-length when he puts forward his own definition of *testimonio* as “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (“The Margin at the Centre” 24). According to this definition, a *testimonio* can follow the structure of a novel, but has to be narrated in the first person about a narrator’s real-life experiences. Beverley also specifies that *testimonio* should be written and not just recorded orally—again, a rather reduced overlap with any traditional notion of “literature” as derived from the Latin *littera* (a written letter, or handwriting). So, although both Barnet and Beverley have in common some connection between *testimonio* and novel, the nature of that connection (and its implications) already diverge. In the meantime, both emphasized that *testimonio* should be an authentic story narrated by a suitable real protagonist.

As *testimonio* attracted increasing critical attention, scholars attempted to define *testimonio* and its relationship to the literary as well as its political implications. They addressed questions such as what is *testimonio*? What kind of narratives may be read as *testimonio*? And how is it different from a novel or fiction? Is there really a difference between a fiction and a *testimonio*? Sklodowska observes that “testimonio inevitably positions itself around the shifting borders of a well-known but elusive genre: the novel. As a matter of fact, for some testimonial writers, like Miguel Barnet, terms such as *testimonio* and *novela testimonial* become interchangeable” (“Spanish American Testimonial Novel” 85). Elsewhere, Sklodowska also surveys the opinions of other critics in order to demonstrate the diverse understandings that clustered around the concept of *testimonio*. She cites for instance Raúl González Cascorro, and his stress on “lo idóneo del testimonio para ‘tipificar un fenómeno colectivo, de una clase, una época, un proceso’” (*Testimonio hispanoamericano* 56).

Meanwhile, Mark Zimmerman puts the political first and foremost with his contention that *testimonio* was “not only a form of representation of popular ideologies and cultural modes; it is also a means of popular-democratic cultural practices closely bound with the same forces that produce political and military insurgency” (“*Testimonio* in Guatemala” 101). In this sense, *testimonio* might almost be envisaged as the discursive wing of the armed struggle. Zimmerman also reports George Yúdice’s comment that the genre was part of the struggle *within* discourse: “testimonio signals a popular struggle initially conducted within the frame of Cuban and then more generally Latin America literary discourse against the force of ‘bourgeois’ boom literature and Western postmodernism” (“*Testimonio* in Guatemala” 101). The Canadian critic Mary Louise Pratt also defines *testimonio*:

as a form during the period of intellectual and artistic experimentation following the Cuban revolution, when means were sought to integrate all sectors of the new society into print culture medium that had formerly been virtually monopolized by the educated elite. *Testimonio* emerges in the context of an imperative to renegotiate relations between intellectuals and grassroots constituencies in the domain of print culture. (“*Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú: Autoethnography and Recoding of Citizenship*” 64)

Thus, even the political import of the genre was implicitly (if not always explicitly) seen in very different ways. Many might have agreed to understand *testimonio* in terms of its relationship to subalternity, as a set stories collectively told about a class and their struggle against authority. But for Cascorro, *testimonio* is a collective phenomenon; for Zimmerman, it is an ideological/political tool; and Pratt focused more on testimonial’s role in academia. *Testimonio* was not perceived homogenously by North and Latin American critics and intellectuals and its role or impact was defined in different ways, or as acting in different areas.

There were also questions about the specific literary form of *testimonio* and its relationship with other, more established, genres, as many critics noted that testimonial texts shared common characteristics with oral narratives, oral histories, life stories and autobiographies. Yet in different ways they strived to differentiate it from these older forms, in line with the notion that *testimonio* was somehow inherently new and distinct. Yet critical approaches to *testimonio* varied significantly regarding its literary (or anti-literary) qualities such as genre, style, and narrative strategy. Scholars “celebrated the *testimonio* for its anti-hegemonic, anti-canonic qualities” (Denegri, “Testimonio and its Discontents” 237). Some, such as Yúdice, compared *testimonio* to postmodern narratives, in that it, too, rejected “grand or master narratives.” Yúdice adds that “the rejection of the master narratives thus implies a different

subject of discourse, one that does not conceive of itself as universal and as searching for universal truth but, rather, as seeking emancipation and survival within specific and local circumstances” (“Testimonio and Postmodernism” 43-44, 44). For her part, Sklodowska explored the “literary fictionality” of the testimonial genre and underlined the relationship between life stories, novels and *testimonios* (“Spanish American Testimonial Novel”). Doris Sommer, like Sklodowska, questions Beverley’s argument that “testimonio is poised against literature” (“No Secrets” 132). Yet it was perhaps Beverley’s position that won out, in seeing (like others such as René Jara and Hernán Vidal) the defining characteristic of *testimonio* that it was not an *interpretation* of reality but “a trace of the real, of that history which, as such, is inexpressible” (Beverley, “The Real Thing” 284). Thus, for Beverley *testimonio* was more real, factual, and true than any literary fiction. This attempt to pit *testimonio* against literature created controversy and debate, and at the same time restricted its potential. For *testimonio* belongs to that unsettling position between fiction (literary elements) and factual elements, which is both what makes it an awkward fit (just like picaresque novels, autobiographies and chronicles) and also the reason it received such critical attention. Binding its position to one place (in this case to facts and truth) made it concrete and controlled, and though this led to the controversies and debates that made for a while one of the most vital discussions about the relationship between text politics, it also led to its (apparent) subsequent demise. But none of this was inherent in the genre (if indeed we can still speak of it as a genre); it was a matter of interpretative choices, of reading strategies.

The strategic nature of the option for *testimonio* was perhaps most evident in the context of debates about teaching and discussing these texts inside the classrooms in universities (and high schools) of the United States. Questions were raised, such as Why is including *testimonios*

in the curriculum important? How will reading *testimonio* in the classroom contribute to the growth and development of students? What kind of perception will they develop about society and the world after reading *testimonios*? Teaching *testimonio* in the classroom was posed as a challenge to the “prescribed curricular boundaries and official definitions of knowledge, and (dis)located North American students socially, culturally, historically and politically” (*Teaching and Testimony* 3). There were many who saw *testimonio* in these terms, as an important source of information that would contribute to the younger generation a different set of perceptions not only about North American society but also about the relation that the United States maintains with its neighbors. On the other hand, there were those who thought that incorporating *testimonio* in the curriculum was a degradation or an insult to the knowledge that the education system promises to impart to the young people of the country.⁵

In his introduction to a collection of essays about *testimonio* in the classroom, editor Allen Carey-Webb argues that “*Teaching and Testimony* is about the power of the word and transformative possibilities of inviting previous marginalized voices into classroom discourse” (3). Published in the wake of the so-called “culture wars” of the 1980s, in which the role of (particularly) higher education came under sustained political scrutiny, the book is dedicated to a reflection on reading and teaching *testimonio* in North American classrooms and sharing that experience and its importance in the students’ lives. The hope or intention behind bringing *testimonio* into the classroom was for an “educational renewal and change at all levels” (3). *Testimonio* was also a medium in North American academia to analyze one’s current political

⁵ For instance, Dinesh D’Souza claims *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* to be a fabrication and criticizes the support that it gained from liberals in the North American academia. He states: “Rigoberta thus provides a model with which American minority and female students are meant to identify: They, too, are oppressed like her; they, too, can make victimology a basis for group solidarity. And if they spend their precious college years reading this stuff and thereby waste the opportunity to have a genuine liberal arts education?” (“I, Rigoberta Menchú . . . Not!”).

situation and circumstance. Students—the future of the nation—should be aware of the role that the US government plays not only in their own country but beyond its borders. Mary Louise Pratt describes her experience of hearing Menchú talk at Stanford University and how that experience helped her reconsider the way she conducted her classes. Pratt tells us that the point she tries to convey to her students is that Menchú’s “call was not for North Americans to change Guatemala—‘We can do that,’ she said—but for them to do something about North America. This, when the hour closes, is the message I try to leave with the classes I teach” (71).

By adapting testimonial narratives inside North American classrooms, academics such as Pratt and others challenged the canon and hegemonic position of received knowledge in North American society. Professors and high school teachers who taught *testimonio* in US classrooms were (they claimed) “on the cutting edge of new, more meaningful pedagogical approaches that connect students to an increasingly global understanding of themselves and others” (5). Pratt describes the objective of teaching *testimonio*: “the effect, and I expect the intent, is to get Westerners ‘out of their heads,’ to force an engagement with what abstractions like justice and injustice mean at the level of lived experience—an engagement that does not spontaneously occur from a position of privilege. There is no ambiguity in Menchú’s account about what is wanted” (67). According to Pratt, it is important to read *testimonio* in US classrooms because students of a powerful nation like the United States should gain political awareness about countries other than their own, and experiences radically different from theirs. Thus, *testimonio*, as liberals or leftists argued, was not just a “true” or factual narrative different from the other literary devices in the sense of the development of the plot of the story; it was also a means to educate North American society, especially its youth, to make them aware about their surroundings. As Pratt asserts: “testimonios seek to correct what is often called the ‘sanctioned

ignorance' of metropolitans, an ignorance produced by the cooptation of the media, by ideological mystifications, systematic information gaps, by psychic displacement, alienation, denial, and self-interest, and by the generalized diffuseness that characterizes power in the metropolis" (65).

From the above discussion, we understand that *testimonio* was celebrated as a new form of narrative that challenged the existing situation not only in literature or the narratives to be told to the world, but also challenged academia and its rules on the books and stories that should be discussed in the classrooms. It forced many scholars to rethink the concept of knowledge that universities often promise to impart to its students. It also challenged conceptions of history, culture and politics. There were scholars who celebrated and welcomed these new ideas with open arms, but there were others who were sceptical about the new form of narrative and its canonization as a genre. They welcomed *testimonio* but questioned the categorization of the genre. They expressed doubt as to whether academia and critics were appropriating the form and using it to serve the North American needs. For example, Gareth Williams explained the reception of the narrative form as "in the interests of 'building new relations' between 'us' and 'them,' they desire to access the 'vast array of the masses' yet recognizes that they may be masses who don't necessarily see the benefits of being 'accessed'" ("Fantasies of Cultural Exchange" 241). Sklodowska cites Antonio Vera-León, according to whom "si los criollos letrados del XIX hacían azúcar con el trabajo negro, el intelectual revolucionario en el XX se da a la tarea de hacer discurso con (y por) el 'otro' para legitimar el orden revolucionario" (63). We notice that these disagreements were not just between liberals and conservatives, but also among liberals themselves or the sympathisers of *testimonio*. In other words, there were differences of opinion regarding the role of political narrative in society.

Further, Alberto Moreiras describes *testimonio* as “provid[ing] 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 unguarded possibility. This unguarded possibility of the real, which is arguably the very core of the testimonial experience, is also its preeminent political claim” (“The Aura of Testimonio” 195). Zimmerman cites Hugo Achugar, who “seeks to moderate the romantic effusions of leftist champions of *testimonio* who have seen it as a virtually unmediated voice of a revolutionary tending social subject constructed as ‘the people,’ arguing that *testimonio* is inevitably constituted with the intervention of and for the lettered” (“*Testimonio* in Guatemala” 101). *Testimonio*, as we have observed, differed vastly in the way it was perceived by critics. And here we further notice that the manner in which it has been defined consists of complex issues that are difficult to simplify. It can serve the needs of North American academics, it might be the romantic idea of upper-class leftists who look at *testimonio* as an account to challenge “the lettered” (“*Testimonio* in Guatemala” 101) Thus, *testimonio* as an approach to narratives has always generated debates and discussions from the moment it first received critical attention in academia. The genre also generated controversy about whether it should be included in the North American curriculum, particularly with the *testimonio* *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*.

1.4 Controversy and Debate

Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio* became an important source to view the ongoing struggle in Guatemala against the authoritarian government. Allen Carey-Webb, in “Transformative Voices,” describes Menchú’s journey as “by the time she reached her early twenties, Rigoberta Menchú had worked as a field laborer, been a maid in the capital city, participated in her father’s organizing efforts, learned Spanish, become an organizer in her own right, witnessed the murder

of family members, been hunted by the army, and fled to Mexico to join an opposition movement in exile” (4). This description further strengthens the argument about why Menchú’s text in particular became such an important story. Carey-Webb adds that this text should be read in the United States to understand “why the oral narrative of an illiterate Guatemalan servant girl should stimulate and connect the variety of classrooms, disciplines, and levels recounted here” (5). Pratt also emphasizes how Menchú’s narrative in particular helps readers to comprehend the role of politics not just between the two countries but in the lives of common people in Guatemala who fall prey to such decisions and also in the lives of common people in the United States who understand the concept of politics not from their own perspective but the way they have been fed by the political leaders of the country. Thus, they develop an idea of these nations not through their own eyes but through the eyes of powerful people in the government. Pratt uses the word “force” of Menchú’s *testimonio*, as “force seemed to me a term that might generate a viable poetics of the testimonio, one not at odds with its political compromise and activist imperative” (57). She asks her students “what gives this book its force How does it force you to think and know things you would not otherwise think or know?” (57).

The question that arises is why Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio* became so well-known in North American universities? Who was Menchú and why did she win such international fame? Menchú was first known internationally and then became a prominent figure in Guatemala. Arturo Arias, in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, narrates Menchú’s journey from leaving Guatemala for Mexico in 1999, after surviving the massacre of “450 Maya villages,” where “she first told her story at the peak of the genocidal campaign against her people, when some experts wondered if Maya culture would ever be able to recover from what seemed like a fatal blow” (5). Menchú’s father, Vicente Menchú, was already known within the Maya community and “had

gained symbolic notoriety among progressive sectors after the destruction of the Spanish embassy by the Guatemala army on January 31, 1980” (5). In Mexico, Menchú was seen “as the daughter of Maya grassroots activist and a martyr of the Spanish embassy, whose name had become emblematic of that particular misadventure” (5). She was an active member of the Committee for Peasants Unity (CUC) in Mexico and worked to attract international attention to the violence taking place in Guatemala, because of which she travelled to different countries. As Arias states, “it was during this tour that Menchú Tum began to be recognized as a particularly articulate spokesperson for the movement” (6). Arias adds that “Cécile Rousseau, a French-Canadian ..., first noticed her innate ability to tell a good story and seduce her audience” (6). Arias also mentions that it was because of the Casa de las Américas award that Menchú’s *testimonio* received as the best testimonial narrative for the year 1983 that this specific work became known to an international audience. Whether the text’s success was due to the award, Menchú’s skill as a good story teller, its description as the “oral narrative of an illiterate Guatemalan servant girl,” (Carey-Webb 5) or its “force” that Pratt talks about, this reception also provoked criticism of its popularity.

Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú created controversy not only about how the genre should be defined and approached in North American academia or in the curriculum, but as to whether Menchú’s narrative was truthful or not. Questions about its “authenticity” or “truth value” as the principal factors of its definition were often brought into focus. To evidence the debates and the contradictions in the *testimonio* genre, critic and scholar David Stoll’s book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* will be particularly important. Stoll undertook anthropological fieldwork and unearthed other Mayan stories from Menchú’s village that give a different perspective from Menchú’s narrative. He argues, unlike Menchú, that it was not only

the army that was destroying villages and spreading the violence, but the guerrillas, who were equally responsible for creating havoc in these villages. Both forces exploited the villagers and took advantage of their situation and helplessness. Hence the peasants suffered at the hands of both the army and the guerrillas. Stoll argues that “unlike *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, which describes the guerrillas as liberation fighters, my Ixil sources tended to lump soldiers and guerrillas together as threats to their lives. Instead of being popular heroes, the guerrillas were, like soldiers, people with guns who brought suffering in their wake” (8).

Moreover, Stoll cites local people from Ixil to show that the suppression of the indigenous people was not done only by the authorities, and quotes an Ixil civil servant who says “It’s not a problem between the people, but between [the army and the guerrillas] ... They’re using us as a shield because, when there are confrontations, the army sends patrollers [Ixil militiamen] to fight. And when the guerrillas attack, they bring civilians to fight with other civilians” (9). Thus, he attempts to show that Menchú’s account is not the only story that could have come out from Guatemala, rather there are many such stories that contradict Menchú’s *testimonio*. Stoll accuses Menchú of manipulating her story for personal and political interests; on the other hand, to question the book’s “authenticity” and in turn that of the genre, he uncovered other unheard stories of Guatemala. Stoll states: “Ordinarily, cultural anthropologists such as myself are more interested in perspective than accuracy. That includes autobiographical accounts where partisanship is only to be expected. But in the case of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the story has been so appealing to foreigners that it has overshadowed other Mayan perspectives on the violence” (“The Battle of Rigoberta” 393). Thus, Stoll brings forth examples and incidents to challenge Menchú’s narrative as the only source of information about the massacre from the

perspective of one person or one narrator, and he asks us to think about the conditions that the peasants experienced in Guatemala as a whole.

Stoll's book and his research on Menchú's narrative became a weapon for conservatives such as Dinesh D'Souza to attack Menchú's story, her international popularity, and also the place of *testimonio* in North American curriculum. D'Souza reacts when Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize and states, "I confess to having been mildly embarrassed when Rigoberta Menchú, Guatemalan political activist and author of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992" ("I, Rigoberta Menchú . . . Not!"). He adds that he is relieved that "she didn't win for literature." He further described Menchú as variously "obscure," a "leftist icon," and an Indian woman who was depicted as being "pierced by the arrows of racist discrimination and colonial exploitation." He claims that this international fame Menchú received went in vain as Stoll had purportedly proved that the story she narrated was fabricated. He questions "how universities, supposedly dedicated to truth and critical thinking, can continue to teach a book that is full of falsehoods." Thus, the canonization of the genre, the argument regarding incorporating such narratives into the curriculum did not serve the purpose that was expected out of it. With Menchú's *testimonio*, the genre's role in society and in academia tended to shift and be restricted to the dichotomy between truth and falsity. The importance of hearing subaltern stories, their struggle and the injustices that were the basis of *testimonio*, was lost amid of the controversy.

Further, Dinesh D'Souza criticizes Menchú in that "She embodies a projection of Western Marxist and feminist views onto South American Indian culture, which is manipulated and distorted to serve Western political objectives" ("I, Rigoberta Menchú . . . Not!"). Journalist Larry Rohter published a story in the *New York Times* on December 15, 1998, describing the debate and David Stoll's version of the story. Rohter concludes his argument by quoting Stoll:

“As a result, it is necessary for readers ‘to distinguish between what can be corroborated and what cannot, what is probable and what is highly improbable’” (“Tarnished Laureate” 65).

Intellectuals and scholars either sided with Stoll’s version of the story and used it to criticize Menchú of lying and fabricating her narrative, or they sided with Menchú and attempted to prove not only that she was saying the truth in her *testimonio* but also to challenge Stoll for his book.

For example, Daphne Patai states:

The main damage done by Rigoberta’s misrepresentations is to the cause of human rights. It cannot help human rights activists to be reminded that their witnesses are apt to deceive them. And it can only diminish the public’s humane responses to repression and privation to discover that a leading icon of the international struggle to improve the human lot has built her reputation at least in part in falsehoods. (“Whose Truth?” 280)

On the other hand, Ileana Rodríguez supports Menchú’s *testimonio* and argues against the “observation [that] serves Stoll as the entry point to what is his fundamental argument, and perhaps his weakest point, namely, that rather than holding the government and the army responsible for the Guatemalan holocaust, what is important is to recognize the regional interethnic and family struggles and animosities that Rigoberta ignores or bypasses and that are part and parcel of the cultures of the indigenous peasants in the Guatemalan highlands. In the 1960s, this type of thinking was known as blaming the victim” (342). Dante Liano adds in support that “we in Guatemala always had someone who came to study us like insects, to write a thesis, to draft a book explaining what we have been and will be forever” (122).

In an interview with Juan Jesús Aznarez, when asked if she can “prove the truth” of her narrative, Menchú herself replies that her life story contains “horrible realities that do not belong to the past. It is not a question of you believing in my own truth or someone else’s; I’m simply

saying that I have the right to my memory, as do my people” (116). Octavio Martí, on the other hand, suggests and also cites Stoll: “It is not, of course, a matter of denying the responsibility of the army nor the crimes that it has committed, but to admit ‘that the guerrillas also have violated human rights, that they also killed indigenous peoples to radicalize the situation and attract Indians to their cause’” (80). He, further, adds that “[t]he bad thing is that today, those mistakes, half-truths, or full lies uttered by Rigoberta Menchú can discredit not only her own person but an entire movement, or color all the information that addresses the suffering of Central America’s Indians” (81). Doris Sommer, in support of Menchú’s *testimonio*, raises some pertinent questions, such as what could be the purpose of attacking Rigoberta Menchú: “The move is not logically necessary, we know. Is it, then, a political, or an ethical, requirement? This is not a rhetorical question” (“Las Casas’s Lies” 242). She further challenges Stoll’s sources: “The effects of his fact finding, I am saying, are hardly neutral, especially as they are linked to the critiques of international funding for peasant initiatives. That is one reason to worry about Stoll’s procedure” (240).

However, Stoll argues that his research focuses particularly on other Mayan voices that have been suppressed under the popularity of Menchú’s story. He asserts that he “never said that her testimonial is a lie or a fraud. In fact, one can argue that it was good that Rigoberta told this story in 1982, because it attracted the world’s attention to the crimes committed by the Guatemalan army, and in the end that contributed to the signing of the peace agreement” (“Stoll: ‘I Don’t Seek to Destroy Menchú’” 67). He is aware, though, of the impression that his book has left on readers and also how it is used by various political groups to support their ideological agenda: either they criticize Menchú for her purported lies and in turn denounce the significance

of *testimonio* or they stand by her and defend her as well as their own perspective on *testimonio*.

He is described therefore as:

watching this spectacle unfold with a mixture of anxiety and pride. The anxiety, he says, comes from the way his work is being used as a political football by opposing camps.

Conservative critics of higher education like Dinesh D'Souza and David Horowitz have pounced on his findings to push their claim that the academy is held captive by politically correct professors. Liberal academics have denounced him for writing the book at all, insisting that he doesn't understand Latin American traditions of communal *testimonio* and suggesting he is endangering Guatemala's fragile 1996 peace by questioning Menchú's credibility. (Strauss, "Truth and Consequences")

Yet Stoll stresses that, in this debate, the essential factor that "the voiceless majority of poor Guatemalans suffered at the hands of the government and the guerrillas—is missing."

Stoll also explains the reason behind writing the book which provoked such controversy and debate around Menchú's *testimonio*. He argues that his book was the result of the definition of *testimonio* expressed by Beverley and Yúdice in North American academia. He argues that "judging by such definitions, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* does not belong in the genre of which it is the most famous example, because it is not the eye-witness account it purports to be" (*Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* 242). Thus, Stoll clarifies that he does not have a problem with Menchú's *testimonio* in particular, but he does have a problem with the approach that North American intellectuals have towards *testimonio*, the way it has been defined and canonized does not serve the purpose of providing a platform to the varied narratives.

Throughout the text he challenges the veracity of the story and emphasizes that other stories are being sidelined, other kinds of indigenous voices are suppressed. Instead of opening up a

platform for such narratives, this one *testimonio* seemed to be dominating other marginal voices. He says: “Beverley and his colleagues have been promoting *testimonio* in a way that does not allow questioning its reliability. Although they are willing to entertain certain issues, on close examination their conception of peasants and political violence is so bound up with romantic notions of authenticity, collectivity, resistance, and revolution that they have no patience with contradictory evidence” (242). Stoll further argues that “*I, Rigoberta Menchú* can be taught critically at the same time that it is taught sympathetically” (243).

Asked about the fabrication that he identifies in Menchú’s *testimonio*, Stoll responds: Rigoberta said that her story was the story of all poor Guatemalans, but the story of a single individual cannot be the story of everybody else, except in a literary sense. I didn’t write this book to prove that a Nobel laureate had embellished part of her biography. There are more important issues. First, it is not an accurate account of the problems that her family and village faced before the violence, nor of how the violence reached Uspantan. Second, I wanted to challenge preconceived and romantic ideas about indigenous peoples and guerrilla warfare. Based on my interview with peasants, I don’t believe they were the revolutionary avant-garde that others claim they were. In the third place, when a book becomes almost sacred, it is a sign that it hides contradictions that ought to see the light of day. In the case of Rigoberta’s foreign admirers, I think that they have chosen to listen to voices that gratify their own needs, instead of facing Guatemala’s complexity. (“Stoll: ‘I Don’t Seek to Destroy Menchú’” 68)

The notion that “Rigoberta’s foreign admirers . . . have chosen to listen to voices that gratify their own needs, instead of facing Guatemala’s complexity” resonates in the articles of critics such as Gareth Williams or Brett Levinson. Williams, in “The Fantasies of Cultural Exchange in Latin

American Subaltern Studies,” questions the manner in which *testimonio* was treated in North American academia: “Rigoberta Menchú and Maya-Quiché are viewed as an expression of value: that of carrying the load of a single social, global function; becoming the means by which the First World can reflect upon itself and define its own areas of struggle and political engagement. The Latin American subaltern becomes everything the United States lacks and craves in order for it to think itself” (244). Levinson, too, proposes a “re-analysis” of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* as he argues that “the critics who have authored the most powerful interpretation of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* have also deployed the text as a political device” (“Neopatriarchy and After” 33). He suggests that “a profound reanalysis of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is needed today in order to shed new light on the political questions that previous critics have so urgently raised” (33). Further, he adds that for “such a reconsideration” we “must begin with a move that, judging from the earlier criticism is perhaps unwelcome: a de-idealization or de-mythification of both *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and of the Quiché-Mayan world that the text describes” (33). So, it was not just Stoll who was challenging the definition of *testimonio* based on factors like truth and authenticity (though we have also noticed that *testimonio* did not have one single definition), but other critics as well were trying to emphasize on aspects less-discussed that the genre claims to carry. All this, however, was overshadowed by the debate.

As the debate raged around the truth-value and authenticity of the testimonial genre, Beverley suggested that, since it arose as a response to an immediate problem, *testimonio* would have to give way to “different forms of representation.”⁶ In a way sought to end this debate, putting the controversy to bed and hoping to damp down the genre’s popularity in the United States, by saying that “this is perhaps the best way to confront the circumstance that the moment

⁶ Beverley, “‘Through all things Modern’: Second Thoughts on Testimonio,” p.61. *Testimonio*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

of *testimonio* is over” (“The Real Thing” 77). Jon Beasley-Murray comments in a review of the collection of essays on *testimonio*, *The Real Thing*: “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” (“Thinking Solidarity” 122). Thus, a narrative form which had challenged dominant literary, academic, and political frameworks, which was a hope for a change in society and which was looked upon, perhaps, as a platform for subaltern voices, suddenly with the controversy and debate around one single *testimonio*, was declared dead by its eminent critics.

In the late nineties and in the twenty-first century, critics once again argue the need to focus on the genre and look beyond its basic characteristics and the authenticity debate. For instance, Arturo Arias suggests a way out of this debate is by shifting the focus from the “truth-value” of *testimonio* considered as a genre to its literary aspect (*Taking their Word* xv). Words such as “truth-value” or “authenticity” indicate concepts that Westerners like to use to validate a given text from their perspective. As Arias says, referring to the famous question as to whether the subaltern can “speak”:

Gayatri Spivak’s seminal question presupposes that a subaltern subject whose voice has been recorded in print is no longer a subaltern subject because the “speaking subject” must enunciate the language of reason to be heard by Western interlocutors. That is, “authentic” discourse is a suppressed or hidden “truth” because of the Westerner’s inability to comprehend it in its own terms, thus subaltern subjects are forced to use the discourse of the colonizer to express their subjectivity. (*Taking their Word* 85)

To avoid the conflict of authenticity in *testimonio* as a genre, Arias suggests that all kinds of texts be approached from the perspective of “narrative textuality,” which he justifies by saying that “by adopting ‘narrative textuality,’ we can avoid the false conflict between supposedly elitist literary creation and the allegedly more political, popular and subaltern *testimonio*” (*Taking their Word* xiv). Alberto Moreiras also argues the need to read *testimonio* as a form in a different manner:

The contemporary attraction of *testimonio* for literary or postliterary reflection does not depend solely on the fact that *testimonio* introduces suppressed and subaltern voices into disciplinary discourse; it does not solely depend on the welcome possibility of articulating, through disciplinary discourse, a political praxis of solidarity and coalition; and it does not depend on the intriguing promise of expansion of disciplinary discourse to cultural practices that seem to threaten as much as they revitalize discussions about what exactly constitutes literature. (*The Exhaustion of Difference* 214)

Moreiras suggests two “determinant factors” for the importance of the contemporary application of *testimonio* as a genre: the “discursive irruption of alternative, that is, non-traditional subjects of enunciation” and that the “*testimonio* allows the literary critical enterprise to break out of the high-literature impasse” (“The Aura of Testimonio” 197). Beasley-Murray, too, suggests a need to “re-examine the nature of the emergent collective subject that *testimonio* may be considered to produce” (126). He further affirms that “*testimonio* is not just at the intersection between subaltern studies and cultural studies but is rather caught in the contradiction between the two” (127).

Thus, over the course of this dissertation I will argue that *testimonio* as a perception will help the reader to understand the connection between literature and *testimonio*, the dichotomy

between fact and fiction and the veracity of a text. In fact, Beasley-Murray states that “the move to go beyond literature inherent in so much of *testimonio* criticism is itself a literary trope . . . , for better or for worse, the aesthetic continually returns, and cannot simply be banished through an emphasis on *testimonio*’s documentary nature” (“Thinking Solidarity” 125). Considering *testimonio* as a perception will also help us read the text in other ways, beyond the restrictions of a limited definition of the testimonial text.

1.5 Reading Testimonio Today

As a mode of reading a text, *testimonio* was thought to have come to an end, but it shows glimmers of its presence in contemporary Central American fiction. In so far as *testimonio* is a reading practice—by “reading practice,” I am referring to the way the way in which a reader approaches, frames, interprets, and analyses any such narrative, story, or account of injustice—it can exist at any time and can once more become a voice against injustice in Central American society today. In fact, we have seen that Beverley and other scholars argued for the prior existence of testimonial texts even before the name emerged and the genre was defined. For example, Beverley proposes that texts such as “the colonial *crónicas* and the ‘national’ essay (*Facundo, Os sertões*), the war diaries (*diarios de campaña*) of . . . Bolívar or Martí” are *testimonios* (31). Here he is clearly proposing a reading of these texts through a lens provided by later *testimonios*. Again we note that it is the way in which we approach a text, and the expectations that we bring to it, that makes it testimonial, more than anything inherent in the text itself. Or take for that matter a text such as *Biografía de un cimarrón*, which is classified as *testimonio* even though its Spanish title clearly identifies it as biography, while its English title, *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, indicates it is *autobiography*. How do we then distinguish *testimonio* from (auto)biography, chronicle, or diary?

The rigid rules and qualities (such as verifiability and authenticity) defining *testimonio* as a genre had more to do with extra-textual factors such as the rise of national liberation movements and indigenous re-awakening than with the narratives themselves. As Beverley mentions, “Testimonio, in other words, is an instance of the New Left and feminist slogan ‘The personal is political’” (“The Margin at the Center” 32). The emergence of the testimonial form as a genre was a response to ideological shifts in both Latin and North America. Its rules were set to give voice to grassroots movements and to reflect the manner in which texts written at the time—detailing subaltern resistance to violent oppression—were read by scholars. It was the way in which the critics *read* such stories, highlighting political struggle, that led to the various definitions of *testimonio*. We have seen that there was no one definition of *testimonio*; rather, most scholars read and perceived *testimonio* in their own way. Therefore, we should not forget the core factor in defining or understanding *testimonio*—the mode of *reading*—which has been consistent not only during the emergence of the genre or the retrospective categorization of prior narratives as *testimonio*, but in the post-war period, too. If there has always been *testimonio*, this is to say that there has always been the option to read a text *as testimonio*, but equally also the option to read it in ways that point out its similarities with other literary or non-literary genres.⁷ Though the term *testimonio* means to witness an incident and give an account (a testimony) of it, the fact that it is narrated from memory, and based on individual experience, raises questions about the limits of the verifiability or authenticity that are to distinguish it from literature. In any case, *testimonio* was always more than just a witness account. It was a subaltern voice, a means

⁷ Beverley explains: “Testimonio may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, *novela-testimonio*, nonfiction novel, or ‘factographic’ literature” (31).

to narrate the revolution, and a challenge to the literary canon. It was a way to approach narrative about injustice.

Fixing these multivalent characteristics into a single definition can blunt its anti-hegemonic teeth. For *testimonio* was—and, I argue, still is—a voice not only against specific injustices, but also more broadly against all hierarchies. *Testimonio* has the potential to destabilize the hegemonic systems of our society, as well as posing a challenge to literary interpretation, if read with due attention to its complexity and heterogeneity. Thus, today's Central American fiction can be read as *testimonio* and hence its continued presence as a reading strategy.⁸ Instead of limiting the approach towards Central American texts as *testimonio*, we should think in broader terms and examine how other kinds of literary texts can also be testimonial in nature, for instance, detective stories, autobiographies, and picaresque novels. We need to acknowledge similarities with these literary genres (or non-literary genres) to make the testimonial reading diverse. Creating definitions to distinguish it from other narrative strategies (like autobiographies, picaresque novels, or oral history) may again lead us to an abrupt halt to this interpretive practice. Looking for similarities elsewhere will not only help us to understand *testimonio* beyond fact and fiction (if we read other literary texts as *testimonio*) but will also broaden the scope of testimonial reading. Hence, *testimonio* as a genre or as a process of reading has no fixed definition or characteristics, as it depends on an individual's interpretation of the narrative. Beverley himself states that “because testimonio is by nature a protean and demotic form not yet subject to legislation by a normative literary establishment, any attempt to specify a generic definition for it, as I do here, is at best provisional, and at worst repressive” (“The Margin at the Center” 31). The *testimonio* debate came to a halt, perhaps, because readers took

⁸ By contemporary fiction, I mean fiction in the wake of the peace processes in El Salvador and Guatemala (which led to final agreements in 1992 and 1996 respectively).

“provisional” definitions to be permanent, forgetting that this could become “at worst repressive.” Readers celebrated *testimonio*’s subversive characteristics, but at the cost of installing a new hegemony.

Understanding texts as *testimonio* can connect truth and lies and fact and fiction. It helps us question fixed notions like these and reflect on concepts that we practice. It is because of this challenging nature that *testimonio* provoked controversy and debate, as it resisted being limited to only one category. It is not just Menchú’s *testimonio* that has literary elements such as the “secret” or the tension between fact and fiction, but other similar works that have been approached as *testimonio*. For example, Miguel Barnet’s classic *testimonio* *Canción de Rachel* shares characteristics with the picaresque novel, particularly when its protagonist describes her journey as a dancer in the theatre and the amount of work that she received from the owner who was madly in love with her. She mentions she married Don Federico even when she was not in love with him; on the other hand, she used his powerful position to establish herself. As she says: “él no fue nunca el hombre que me hizo feliz Estar con él era para mí un placer social” (100). This proves that *testimonio* is not only about resistance against the oppressors, but also how the powerless manipulate the powerful to survive. This type of narrative is commonly noted in picaresque literature. Similarly, Omar Cabezas’s *La Montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* resonates with adventure fiction. Elements of thrill are particularly evident in sections where the narrator describes the dangers and uncertainty inherent in guerrilla life in the forest. Also, the personification of the mountain and the relation that it has with the guerrillas is more literary than testimonial. Beasley-Murray in *Posthegemony* states that “appealing to the authenticity of its contact with bodies described in affective terms . . . , *testimonio* constructs the fiction of an organic link between historical tradition and political project, between everyday

culture and nation-state” (266). Thus, considering *testimonio* as a mode of approaching a literary text keeps that text open to multiple interpretation, and can also open a dialogue between fiction and *testimonio* instead of creating a wall between them.

Critics have defined and approached *testimonio* from varied perspectives. Indeed, Elzbieta Sklodowska states that “by virtue of its hybridity, *testimonio* has invited approaches from literary criticism, anthropology, oral history, philosophy, and political science, and in many ways, it continues to be an open text that can be read according to different paradigms” (“Poetics of Remembering” 254). I therefore propose in this dissertation that *testimonio* has always been an approach to reading a narrative. This reading style will bridge the gap between fact and fiction, and can also allow a literary text to be read differently.

This does not mean that any text can be read as *testimonio*, but there should be a shift from the characteristics that were important earlier and might have emerged under a specific socio-political situation in Central American literature. Thus, as the times change, we have to alter our focus too. The characteristics that tended to guide us to read texts as *testimonio* earlier, should change today. Holding to factors such as solidarity, authenticity, resistance, or urgency as the key characteristics to define *testimonio* will not help us to understand and read literature today—it will rather hinder a testimonial approach to texts. For instance, the stress on the urgency of *testimonio*’s appeal to the reader’s conscience was one of the key elements of defining the testimonial genre during the civil wars. Beverley mentions that “The situation of narration in *testimonio* has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself” (*Testimonio* 32). Many *testimonios* published at time of civil war in the eighties emerged in response to the urgent need to tell the story about oppression in Latin America to the world;

however, this “urgency,” which was key to the genre then, has perplexed readers in the post-war era, when urgency is no longer the primary impulse for testimonial reading. It becomes an obstacle to our understanding of these narratives now the wars have ended. Does this indicate that Central America has become a just and peaceful society? As readers of *testimonio* we should think of such questions and look for testimonial aspects in contemporary texts. Perhaps now they are not neither purely *testimonios* nor purely fiction, but can offer readers different points of access depending upon our expectations or desires.

Testimonio plays on the complex notion of literature and how we perceive it. Questions such as, what truth is and whose truth are we listening to? What is authentic or factual narrative? Who decides whether a text is factual, truthful or authentic? It challenges boundaries and forces us to think differently. It engages with narratives that address injustices in society carried out not just by state authorities, but by other institution as well. For instance, injustices faced by immigrants in North America, or in the institution of marriage between a husband and a wife, in school, universities or in a family. Thus, *testimonio* can be a medium to question the fixed notions of viewing injustice in the world.

In the chapters that follow I also argue that *testimonio* should not be limited to written texts, but welcome narratives from different mediums of expression. For example, documentary, feature films, theatre or painting which reveal a story about intolerance and cruelty can also be considered *testimonio*. Reading literary fiction and viewing art from the perspective of *testimonio* will bypass much of the unproductive debate that surrounds the genre: the dichotomy between truth and lies, fact and fiction, authenticity and inauthenticity. Further, it enables a link between *testimonio* and Latin American fiction, establishing a connection between the past and the present post-war situation. For example, parody, which I will discuss in the next chapter, is

one of the elements of testimonial reading. Parody, as explained in Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody*, is a bridge between the past and the present but not just in a literary form of imitation. Rather, "it would require the addition of an ironic and critical dimension of distanciation for it to be an accurate reflection of the art of today" (10). Parody does not only have the characteristics of comedy and ridicule, but also seriousness. Hutcheon, further, affirms: "When we speak of parody, we do not just mean two texts that interrelate in a certain way. We also imply an intention to parody another work (or set of conventions) and both a recognition of that intent and an ability to find and interpret the back grounded text in its relation to the parody" (22). For instance, Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (2004) is a parody of the *testimonio* genre. It is a story about a reporter in El Salvador who was exiled due to his political writings. He is offered a job in Guatemala, compiling and editing *testimonios* by indigenous people for a project conducted by the Catholic Church. The act of compilation in a fictional context is itself a parody. Also, we see that the protagonist maintains a diary where he notes down sentences from the texts that he is reading. This act of noting down can be compared to the characteristics of testimonial as a genre wherein the intellectual or ethnographer records the oral account that is then presented in the written form. The fact that he chooses to note down some phrases in preference to others is an interesting aspect that strikes at similarity while establishing difference. Another novel by Castellanos Moya, *El asco*, highlights the relation between the narrator and the compiler. However, here the narrator is a well-educated established professor in a Canadian university and the compiler is a struggling writer in El Salvador; unlike, the classic *testimonio*, where the narrator used to be often illiterate and recounted her/his story to an intellectual who later compiled the narrative for a larger audience. Again, the reading of this text as *testimonio* challenges our understanding of the genre. *El hombre de Montserrat* by Dante Liano, is about

how a member of the military is marginalized and victimized by the state for which he works. It also describes the vulnerability of a soldier when faced with guerrillas. In this way, this text inverts the role of the oppressor and the oppressed. A representative of an army that perpetrates violence is now a victim himself, expressing fear in the face of the “oppressed” (the guerrillas). The fact that reading *testimonio* as a strategy can be applied to a post-war context to describe the social and political scenario shows a persistent engagement with *testimonio* as a reading technique.

Contemporary texts such as *Insensatez*, *El material humano*, and *El hombre de Montserrat* consist of a plurality of narrative voices. As Hutcheon says: “It is not a matter of nostalgic imitation of past models; it is a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity” (8). Texts of the eighties and nineties that were read as *testimonios* narrated incidents from memory and invoked a past condition in oppressive dictatorial regimes, whereas contemporary ones begin at the point where the classic *testimonio* ends. They narrate the condition of the people during an oppressive dictatorial regime and are taken further ahead by depicting the situation of these countries after the war where, though notionally democracy has arrived, killing and kidnappings are as prevalent as ever, perhaps even more so.⁹ Hence, they are more interested in finding a solution to the social and political problem; here we could also find elements of detective genre (thrill and suspense) in these texts. It is productive to set modern texts that can be read as *testimonios* alongside the testimonial genre to see whether there is a bridge between past and present modes of reading, whether recent

⁹ However, these contemporary texts are also diverse. For example, *El hombre de Montserrat*, which was published in 1994, in the midst of the negotiations leading towards final peace accords, shows the tail-end of the war (and combat between the army and guerrillas). By contrast, in *El material humano*, published in 2009, it is violent crime that comes to the fore. We can see then a general transition from State oppression to new forms of everyday violence under neoliberalism.

fiction contributes “to the backgrounds that determine their meanings” and whether today’s texts challenge the canonization of *testimonio* as a genre.

We see *testimonio* as a mode of reading that is continuously updating itself, so the phase of *testimonio* as a process of interpretation and understanding literature is not over. The issues that *testimonio* addressed in the 1980s and 1990s have changed in the era of neoliberalism, market hegemony, and globalization. As we will see in detail in the following chapters, one of the repercussions of the long civil war is migration. Francine Masiello in *The Art of Transition* discusses how the market in the era of neoliberal economics is appropriating subversion. The act of being subversive is to make oneself heard, but the same act is appropriated by the market for commercial purposes. Therefore, authors continually try to develop new narrative strategies to resist the homogenizing demands of the market. Perhaps the use of different narrative strategies in fiction and films are a way to avoid market appropriation, describe the contemporary issues of society and connect them with the past. This connection between the present and the past demonstrates a continuity in society and is itself a subversive. For instance, we will see how cultural critic and theorist Nelly Richard critiques the Chilean government for homogenizing the memories of the past, which results in difficulty of understanding the present condition. When we bring back similar kinds of memory in the present, we make the past stagnant and distant from the contemporary times. We need to bring back a variety of memories from the past to keep it fresh in the minds and to maintain a relation with the present. Such heterogeneity can challenge the appropriation of market and maintain its subversive quality.

1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter we have traced in some detail the long journey of *testimonio*. We understood the retrospective projection of the concept of *testimonio* into the colonial period, as it started to gain

importance during the dictatorships in South America and the civil wars in Central America, particularly as many writers and critics grew dissatisfied with Boom novels for their exclusion of a truly subaltern voice. The subaltern was absent from representation even as, in the struggle against authoritarian regimes and the rise of so-called new social movements, figures such as women and peasants were increasingly prominent and were playing a significant role in challenging authority. It was felt that they had a story to tell, a narrative through which to articulate their new-found protagonism. *Testimonio* therefore became a form that helped to provide a medium for those narratives.

We also saw the categorization of *testimonio* as a genre and an urge to canonize it. It was soon largely constrained by terms like authenticity, truth and fact, which became keys to understanding the newly-formed genre. I, however, would emphasize here that while such terms were gaining importance in academia, other arguments by critics such as Sommer and Sklodowska demonstrated the literariness of testimonial writing, challenging the defining factors of *testimonio*. Many scholars were also skeptical of such celebration and were afraid that it might lead to the appropriation of its strategy by the market against which perhaps it was struggling to exist. It fell into the trap of its definitions and classification. A text such as Menchú's was read and discussed according to the key elements of *testimonio*—which then led to debate, controversy, and intense scrutiny.

The genre abruptly came to an end without answering all the questions it had raised. More specifically, the genre died out without fulfilling the “anti-hegemonic” role expected of it. It left critics and scholars stranded, and so they quickly moved on once they were no longer so sure how to approach the genre. A series of mostly unspoken questions—why is the “moment of *testimonio*” over? Why not still read texts as *testimonio*? And how can we (if we want) revive the

genre?—keep haunting us as we are not being given a valid reason for its closure. Thus, I propose to revive *testimonio*. I argue that *testimonio* is not over and that it should be looked at and read differently today—in the form of fiction, autobiographies, chronicles or diary entries—and focus on how these narratives then not just address injustices but also maintain its subversive nature. Today's texts may not reflect on the war, but they describe its repercussions. Thus, it is also time to rethink the concepts that defined the genre. What role did such definitions play in critiquing the society? Did those definitions serve their purpose? How should we perceive it now? Can we relate it with earlier definitions of *testimonio*? Lastly, should we reread earlier *testimonios*? And if so, why?

Reading texts as *testimonio* not only bridges many dichotomies, but also links the past and the present. *Testimonio* is a way to revisit the past and connect it to the present. Texts that are read as *testimonios* also have been an alternative voice to the official history. Hence, they are important sources of the past that should not be simply overlooked because the genre is over; rather, they should be further explored. Testimonial perception allows us to review the past critically and act accordingly in the present. There is a commonality, a continuity with the earlier definitions of *testimonio* and also with the earlier testimonial texts. For example, one such common element is the injustice that we observe in the past and present alike. And, as long as these Central American narratives in any medium are able to bring forth the injustices prevalent in a society, and the struggles to overcome them, *testimonio* will continue to highlight these stories and give a voice to the voiceless. We cannot therefore negate the previous definitions, the context from which *testimonio* emerged, or leave the earlier *testimonios* behind, as these will guide us to understand better both the present narratives as *testimonio* and the contemporary Central American situation. However, we have to be aware about the role of the market—

especially its tendency to appropriate subversion—and keep generating ways to challenge its tendency to simplify a society’s complexities.

Chapter Two: Contemporary Central American Fiction: Parody and Subversion

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores contemporary Central American literature to interpret it as a sort of postmodern parody of classic *testimonio*. In Central America, *testimonio* emerged during the period of civil war and insurgency in the 1970s and 1980s, as a means of reflecting on the injustices suffered by indigenous people, and the struggles of *campesinos* and the working class to attain their rights. With this struggle for equality, they aimed to achieve a better and more just society. With the peace agreements that put an end to the civil wars (and with the end of their Cold War frame), it was then claimed that the genre had come to an end: John Beverley, for instance, asserted that the “moment of *testimonio* is over” (*Testimonio* 77). But here I ask whether this “moment” is really behind us, or whether in fact we can re-read Central American fiction today as (at least in part) a repetition or return to the testimonial impulse from within the post-war era. Of course, there are differences between the two periods and their associated texts. Contemporary fiction does not simply imitate the earlier form of reading; it offers a critique even if at the same time it also emphasizes a continuity with the past. I understand this coexistence of critique and continuity in terms of postmodern parody, which Linda Hutcheon defines as “a kind of contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history. This paradoxical conviction of the remoteness of the past and the need to deal with it in the present has been called the ‘allegorical impulse’ of postmodernism . . . I would simply call it parody” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 91). It is on this basis that I read contemporary fiction in terms of parody and suggest that it (still) calls for a reading in terms of *testimonio*.

Unlike the testimonial texts upon which it draws, contemporary fiction tends to be more disillusioned. The novels I will be examining question the hope to build a just society in the wake of a violent civil war. After all, the social circumstances of these countries have not in fact changed much in the post-war environment. Violence, oppression, and injustice are still features of today's Central American countries, and this is reflected in their literature. But it is also for this reason that they can still be approached as *testimonio*: they share the denunciatory and critical impulse of classical *testimonio*, if not their faith in the potential power of social struggle. However, it is not just the content of these narratives that demonstrates the persistence of the testimonial impulse in these texts, but also the form. As I show in detail, there are many formal elements, such as the use of first-person narration that stands in for a larger community, or the device of constructing a dialogue between the narrator and a compiler figure, that are common both to the earlier texts and to much present-day fiction. Yet as much as this literature echoes what preceded it, it also differs in many ways, and this combination of resemblance and reconfiguration challenges key aspects of the definition of *testimonio* provided by most North American scholars at the height of the genre's popularity. Thus, reading contemporary fiction as *testimonio* raises questions about such definitions, on the one hand, and makes us reconsider such narratives and their effectiveness. To what extent did *testimonio*, as previously conceived, contribute to peace and equality in Central American countries? Did those aspects that seemed to distinguish *testimonio* in opposition to hitherto hegemonic forms of literature succeed, or did they perhaps close off other possible avenues of political and aesthetic expression? Let us not make the same mistake again. Reading contemporary fiction as *testimonio* shows us an alternate way of approaching Central American literature today; limiting our appreciation of them only to

their literary qualities would mean restricting their potential much like what happened (if in reverse) to the testimonial genre.

The texts studied in this chapter—*El asco*, *Insensatez*, and *El hombre de Montserrat*—reveal the reality of post-war disillusion. Salvadoran author Jacinta Escudos also attests to this disillusion when she tells us that: “Los nuevos temas comenzaron a girar en torno a personajes que se movían en una sociedad violenta, aparentemente sin valores o con un sentido de la vida más bien amoral” (“Los inclasificables: escritores salvadoreños hoy” 140). Yet these texts also have elements that defined classic *testimonio*—the key factors that not only separated the genre from other literary forms but also provoked controversy and debate—and they move us to reconsider whether *testimonio* (now understood above all as a reading strategy) is really over, or whether it still has purchase today. At a time when society is in crisis in all spheres—social, cultural, and political—*testimonio* as a reading strategy can describe contemporary forms of unrest and can question the dream of a just society that Central America once saw beckoning in a post-war era. These contemporary texts bring *testimonio* to life and insist that the testimonial strategy can still be used to address oppression, violence, and injustice. They emphasize the importance of past struggle, its dreams and failures. But they also reflect on ongoing problems and issues that thwarted the desire to create such a society, and therefore they can be seen as a parody of the classic *testimonio*. The issue that arises here is not simply how *testimonio* as a reading strategy, thought to be over with the end of the civil war, allows us an insight into these recent texts and the ways in which they address contemporary social issues. Are these texts not also trying to tell us about the readings of classic *testimonio*, the issues that such texts raised and the connections that can be drawn between the earlier readings and current ones?

It is true that the contemporary texts can also simply be read as fiction by readers unaware of the testimonial aspects; however, this may restrict these texts' potential for heterogeneous interpretations. Reading Central American fiction as *testimonio* is not simply a matter of recognizing the testimonial techniques the authors have used to tell these stories, but also gaining a deeper understanding of the palimpsestic complexity of these texts. For if we see *testimonio* to be over, and contemporary fiction as a new beginning, we obscure these texts' relationship with a past that (as Hutcheon points out in her discussion of parody) "is not something to be escaped, avoided, or controlled ... the past is something with which we must come to terms" (55). Parody is one way of navigating the past. These texts, therefore, show continuity with the past—they acknowledge it—and at the same time examine it, perhaps to make readers aware of how things once were, its consequences and the ways in which that history is repeated in the present. Mackenbach observes in relation to post-war Central American fiction: "Todas estas novelas utilizan la historia como pretexto/pre-texto para la literatura y se valen de la memoria como recurso ficcional" ("Narrativas de la memoria en Centroamérica" 248). Contemporary fiction parodies the testimonial tradition, yet this parody is lost if readers are unaware of the critical discussion on classic *testimonios* against which the new readings are set; if so, these narratives are just limited to fiction much as earlier texts (like *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, *Miguel Mármol* and *Si me permiten hablar*) were just limited to *testimonio*. For parody does not only critique the earlier form but also pays homage to it. Parody emphasizes the ongoing importance of *testimonio* in the present and questions its definitions and key aspects.

This is also a time of globalization, in which the market reigns supreme.¹⁰ Hegemonic power no longer rests solely in the hands of the state, but in the hands of the market as well in Latin America. *Testimonio* as a reading phenomenon questions the market's homogenization and appropriation of subversion or dissent. After all, from the start *testimonio* was a vehicle through which to challenge dominant social logics; it was a narrative approach that questioned the perception of literature as a high-class artistic creation. In *The Art of Transition*, Francine Masiello discusses the role of market in the era of neoliberal economics and its strategies to appropriate subversion. Dissident and critical voices seek to make themselves heard, but they can easily come to seem just another option within a crowded marketplace that tolerates diversity if it can lead to commercial profit. With the wane of debates over *testimonio* as a genre, the question is whether these texts that expressed opposition to military repression and civil war are now, under democracy, simply part of "the politics of commodification and sales" (55). Whether a genre that was defined on the basis of solidarity, resistance, and the assertion of a subaltern voice is now simply sold in terms of "difference" in a way that evacuates its political thrust as these texts become commodities or "token of exchange" (55). Limiting testimonial exploration can lead to the appropriation of the reading strategy by the market for less complex characteristics or even to the death of the genre, whereas liberating it from such restrictive definitions will allow us to explore alternative ways to interpret stories. Parody can have a "subversive" role in a time of globalization; it not only sets current fiction against the background of *testimonio* but also questions the key aspects that classified earlier texts as *testimonio*, thus making it difficult for the market to appropriate such subversive approaches. This is the grand experiment of contemporary

¹⁰ Brett Levinson: "the market is itself a way of comprehending, of knowing the globe. Better said, it is a 'sense of the world' that threatens to bring knowledge, even the need and desire for knowledge, to an end" (*Market and Thought* 1).

Central American fiction. As Masiello says of such experimentation, “Against the marketed package of ‘ready-made’ cultural products and ideas that neoliberalism places at our disposal, the cultural experiment provokes forms of thinking that move toward alternative frameworks for apprehending social forms” (13). This chapter will show that contemporary Central American literature can still be read as *testimonio* even as it challenges the foundations on which *testimonio* is built. Reading texts as *testimonio* was not a concept of the eighties or nineties alone, as it can be practiced today much perhaps as it was practiced even before the canonization of the genre; the moment of *testimonio* is not yet over. The reading and the interpretation of narratives as *testimonio*, however, been modified and updated. Analyzing these texts as *testimonio* will help us to understand not only the presence of literary elements in classic *testimonios* but also the presence of testimonial elements in contemporary fiction.

My reading of these texts will, then, suggest new ways to approach Central American literature (as *testimonio*) and raise issues that are not only related to the region’s post-war social or political contexts, but also to the impact of the market on society. It will take into account the critique that aimed to build a better and more just region, a task that remains unaccomplished. In the following sections, I highlight the resemblance between contemporary texts and *testimonio*, note their differences from the earlier texts, and discuss the issues that today’s literary works examine. I have divided my analysis of *testimonio* into three subthemes: the treatment of fact and fiction in literature; the hierarchical relationship between compiler and witness; and the key characteristics of *testimonio*, such as solidarity, victimization, marginalization, and literary value.

2.2.1 *Fact versus Fiction*

John Beverley proposes that the testimonial genre is concerned more with fact (“the real thing”) than fiction. This is what differentiates *testimonio* from literature. However, it was precisely

because such authenticity was defined as what was at stake in *testimonio* that so much controversy erupted around Rigoberta Menchú's story *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* (1983). After all, this had been read very much as a true, factual story whose truthfulness and representativity could not be questioned, only to be then challenged by anthropologist David Stoll. Arturo Arias states: "Stoll launched a campaign against the cultural representation in Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* that was successful largely because American critics, not Menchú, claimed that her text sought to represent all the poor people of Guatemala and all indigenous peoples on the continent" (*Taking their Word* xxi). Contemporary fiction avoids this trap. Though it does indeed claim a form of referentiality, insisting on certain facts of post-civil war society, it also questions whether it is possible for a text to be only factual or fictional and makes us doubt that the ways in which we read *testimonio* and literature are so very different. Since these texts are notionally works of fiction, and presented as such, even as they continually introduce specific moments of precise referentiality, they make us wonder whether a fictional text can or should be read as *testimonio* (or a testimonial text be read as fiction).

Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* (2004), for instance, presents many true incidents with a fictional coating. This is the tale of a man whose job it is to read through testimonial texts in the aftermath of a civil war. Told in the first person, the nameless narrator in a nameless country is a reporter from El Salvador who had to leave his country after writing a controversial article about its president. He is offered a job by his friend Erick, whom he had met in Mexico during his exile, where Erick was completing his postgraduate studies. Erick offers him the job of compiling and editing *testimonios* written by indigenous people, as part of a project conducted by the Catholic Church. Now, though the name of the country where the narrative is set is not mentioned in the text, there are ample clues to show that it is Guatemala. For instance, the

narrator talks about the Kaqchikel indigenous people; he mentions the ethnicity Mam; and also refers to General Otto Pérez Molina in the text albeit disguised under the name of Octavio Pérez Mena. About this reference, Castellanos Moya would later say: “Octavio Pérez Mena, nombre de ficción que remite a otro real: Otto Pérez Molina, actual presidente de Guatemala, signado durante el juicio como coordinador de la represión en aquellos años, a partir de varios testimonios e investigaciones.”¹¹ Further, the text mentions the name of Ríos Montt, Guatemalan President in the early 1980s and subsequently indicted for human rights abuses and crimes against humanity, when the civil registrar of a village called Tototocapan is brutally killed by the army for refusing to hand them over a list of the village’s dead. The state needed such a list to “revivirlos y que pudieran votar a favor del partido del general Ríos Montt” (*Insensatez* 72). When asked in an interview about the connection between the names in the book and real life, Castellanos Moya adds: “También ahí hay una referencia a otro, Francisco Ortega Menaldo. Eran los dos jefes de inteligencia más famosos, formados en Israel y en Estados Unidos. Son tipos muy listos, no son los típicos matarifes. Es una sociedad muy jodida la guatemalteca.”¹² Indeed, the *testimonio* of the indigenous people that the protagonist is compiling in the text is set against the report *Guatemala nunca más*, as Ortiz Wallner reveals:

El informe *Guatemala nunca más* (1998), que recopila testimonios de los sobrevivientes de las masacres sufridas por los pueblos indígenas en Guatemala, fue presentado oficialmente al público en Guatemala el 24 de abril de 1998 en una ceremonia presidida por monseñor Juan Gerardi. ... Este informe ha sido identificado como el intertexto más importante de la novela de Castellanos Moya. (*El arte de ficcionar* 152)

¹¹ Ángel Berlanga, “Memorias del hombre nuevo.” Interview with Horacio Castellanos Moya. *Página 12* (May 19, 2013). <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-5031-2013-05-20.html>.

¹² Ángel Berlanga, “Memorias del hombre nuevo.” Interview with Horacio Castellanos Moya. *Página 12* (May 19, 2013). <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/libros/10-5031-2013-05-20.html>.

Insensatez is thus about *testimonio*, but also references specific *testimonios* and at least to some extent, in invoking the names and activities of those who led the repression in Guatemala, surely functions itself as *testimonio*.

Similar concrete references to Guatemala's painful past can be found also in Dante Liano's *El hombre de Montserrat*. In an interview with Ortiz Wallner published in the Guatemalan newspaper *La Prensa*, Liano was asked directly whether his book could be considered a *testimonio*. He replied: "En *El hombre de Montserrat* utilizo un registro cercano al testimonio, género muy practicado en América Latina." He also comments that "Yo quise recoger en esta obra el recuerdo de lo que vi y tenía la urgencia de contarlo, en eso podía ser asimilable a un testimonio, no creo que en la forma" (*El arte de ficcionar* 146).¹³ This demonstrates that though these are fictional tales, they highlight their social relevance through invocations of authenticity, and with urgency to tell their story much like classic *testimonios* as they were traditionally read. These narratives are based on real events of Guatemala; yet there are differences. Contemporary fiction challenges the dichotomy of fact and fiction as a basis for distinguishing a literary text from *testimonio*. It asks: What if these factual characteristics of testimonial readings are challenged? Will a text still be considered to be *testimonio* or will it cease to be *testimonio*? In other words, they parody such techniques on which the testimonial genre was established.

Castellanos Moya's *El asco* (1996) consists of an uninterrupted monologue (without even paragraph breaks) by a character named Edgardo Vega, who is conveying his frustration and

¹³ I believe the form of *testimonio* is as important as its content, though there is no dichotomy between the form and the content. However, according to our traditional reading, the form of *testimonio* is understood as a first-person narrative told on behalf of a community to an intellectual who later transcribe the story into an account for the reader. *El hombre de Montserrat* may not contain all the elements that were used to define the form of the *testimonio*, (though, we shall see later that it has resemblance with the classic testimonial form) instead, it challenges the reader's approach towards *testimonio* (both in form and in content).

hatred towards El Salvador to his friend Moya, who is also the text's compiler. Vega is now a Canadian citizen, who lives in Montreal and is a Professor of Art History at McGill University. He travels to San Salvador to attend his mother's funeral and to claim his part of the property that she has bequeathed. During the visit, he meets Moya in a bar and complains about the country. In *El asco*, the conflict between fact and fiction can be demonstrated through the similarity between the character and compiler Moya on the one hand, and the author Horacio Castellanos Moya on the other. The relationship between the compiler and the author raises an important question—whether Moya the compiler and Castellanos Moya the author are the same person—that brings into focus the role of the witness and the compiler in a reading of *testimonio*. *El asco*, which is a fiction, thus subverts the concept of authenticity and the “truth value” of the testimonial genre that critics often claim to be the key factors in distinguishing it from other genres. The primary resemblance between the Moyas is that they both are writers. The other similarity is that the compiler Moya is from Tegucigalpa (Honduras), like the real writer. For instance, Vega comments to his friend Moya: “Vos naciste en Tegucigalpa, Moya, y te pasaste los diez años de la Guerra en México, por eso no entiendo qué haces aquí” (*El asco* 25-26). This relation between the Moyas brings the link between fact and fiction to the fore. The facts of the writer Moya are related to the fictional character in the text. It forces the reader to ask whether reading *testimonio* is so very distinct from reading fiction and vice-versa? It makes us rethink the rigid line drawn between fact and fiction in testimonial reading, as much as in what is notionally fiction. It also makes us reconsider the notions of truth and authenticity that dominated the reception of texts read as *testimonio* in the eighties. Can these contemporary works of fiction be categorized as unreal or inauthentic? Can we not verify the factual evidences mentioned in these three narratives? How can we, then, distinguish them from *testimonio*?

Another example from the same text (whose full title is *El asco: Thomas Bernhard en San Salvador*) concerns the narrator, the protagonist or witness Edgardo Vega. The identification of this narrator is ambivalent, as the text makes clear from the start, in a brief preface that states that “Edgardo—Vega, el personaje central de este relato, existe: reside en Montreal bajo un nombre distinto—un nombre sajón que tampoco es Thomas Bernhard. Me comuniqué 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” (*El asco* 11). So Vega is and is not the real writer Thomas Bernhard, just as he both is and is not another, unnamed but real resident of Montreal.¹⁴ *El asco* plays with the concept of truth and fiction, such that on the one hand it can be read as a fictional text but on the other it claims to be a “truthful” story narrated and compiled by real people. Ortiz Wallner observes that the Preface “ironiza la situación narrador/testimoniante-autor/recopilador al prevenir al lector” (*El arte de ficcionar* 138-139).¹⁵ She further adds that “de esta manera queda planteada la ambigüedad de la narración en tanto que declarar la ‘verdad’ sobre lo que el lector está a punto de leer es, a la vez, un desenmascaramiento de la confección ficcional-literaria” (*El arte de ficcionar* 139).

This text is not only about the combination of fact and fiction, where it is difficult to separate the fact from the fiction, but also about the protagonist who calls himself Thomas Bernhard (the Austrian author), who is in El Salvador. This demonstrates the presence of

¹⁴ Thomas Bernhard was an Austrian author known for his stinging social critique. Castellanos Moya explains, in an authorial postscript, the reason behind choosing this particular writer and his stylistic approach to denounce post-war El Salvador. He says that he has adapted the style from Bernhard “tanto en su prosa, basada en la cadencia y la repetición, como en su temática, que contiene una crítica acerba a Austria y su cultura” (*El asco* 136). He adds that “yo me había divertido durante la escritura de este libro, en el que quise hacer una demolición cultural y política de San Salvador, al igual que Bernhard la había hecho de Salzburgo, con el placer de la diatriba y el remedo” (136).

¹⁵ According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodern parody “is fundamentally ironic and critical” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 94). She further states in *Irony’s Edge* that “irony’s edge gives parody its “critical” dimension in its marking of difference at the heart of similarity” (3). Irony and Parody, therefore, seem to be interrelated. As Hutcheon explains that the parodic approach towards a creative work has an ironic critical aspect.

intertextuality and a similarity between the political and social condition with that of Central America with those of Europe. Megan Thornton emphasizes the importance of Bernhard's writing style as adapted by Castellanos Moya to bring to attention to the overlapping of literature and *testimonio*, authenticity and inauthenticity, fact and fiction. She writes that "the reference to Bernhard is central to this performativity, for Bernhard also mixed autobiographical elements and real-life characters and experiences with creative inventions, blurring the line between fact and fiction" ("A Postwar Perversion" 210). Thornton points out that Vega's "cynical attitude parodies the testimonio's perceived idealism and optimism" ("A Postwar Perversion" 209). Testimonial reading was based on a hope to build a just society, free of violence and crime; however, *El asco* parodies testimonial reading. It takes *testimonio* as its foundation then challenges or undercuts this very ground. It questions the conceptual distinction between fact and fiction, so vital in classic testimonial genre, but at the same time demonstrates the importance of reading *testimonio* in contemporary times. This literary work, therefore, offers multiple avenues of interpretation. It is simply not testimonial or fictional but a combination of both. If we limit our reading of *El asco* only to fiction or to *testimonio*, we once again establish an unhelpful and false dichotomy between truth and lies, fiction and *testimonio*.

In *Insensatez*, too, one can notice similarities with previous testimonial readings, in that it is based on many real and factual events, yet it creates a hybrid discourse between the narrative told by the principal protagonist that is a "fiction" (though it mentions names of some people and ethnic groups who exist in reality) and the narratives of the *testimonio* that should be read as "fact." *Insensatez* juxtaposes the traditional and contemporary narrative forms, thereby challenging the understanding of *testimonio* within the Western canon. This story is narrated mostly in the first person, but readers are also aware that phrases from the *testimonios* that the

protagonist is reading have impacted him throughout. These phrases interrupt the narration from time to time and more so as the plot develops. Gradually a connection evolves between the protagonist and his work: it does not matter whether the voice is the narrator's or from the *testimonios* that he is compiling, and thus the line between fact and fiction gets blurred. As Ileana Rodríguez describes it: "A medida que el narrador-editor avanza en las correcciones del texto de la verdad para lo cual lo han empleado, el poder literario del texto va fomentando el terror en él mismo, que ya no es capaz de distinguir entre texto y contexto, ficción y realidad" ("Estéticas de esperanza, memoria y desencanto" 34). The act of compilation of *testimonios* in a fictional context is itself a challenge to the earlier readings.

Dante Liano's *El hombre de Montserrat* (1994) is set in Guatemala and portrays a lieutenant, Carlos García, and his perception of the war between the guerrilla and the army.¹⁶ Although the story revolves around the lieutenant's daily life, as it unfolds we see that there is another story within the larger framework. It deals not only with the calmness among the people during war or living in a country where the nightly sound of gunfire or bombs is considered normal; it also revolves around the suspense of a murder case. The plot reveals the investigation and search for whoever has killed the lieutenant's brother-in-law, Ramón: "Ramón Gómez era el más simpático de los cuñados de García: alto, robusto, buen conservador y mejor bebedor, mujeriego y peleonero cuando se hacía necesario" (*El hombre de Montserrat* 26). But Ramón has not died recently: he died years ago and the mystery behind his death was not known to his family until now. It was Marco Antonio Gómez, or Toño as he is commonly addressed in the text, the other brother-in-law, who discovered it.

¹⁶ As mentioned by Ortiz Wallner in *El arte de ficcionar*, 146. The text was first published in Italian as *L'uomo di Montserrat* during Liano's exile in Italy, and it was first published in Spanish in 1994 by a small Mexican editorial, and later was published in 2005 in Guatemala and Barcelona by Roca Editorial.

In *El hombre de Montserrat*, the tension between fact and fiction can be noted in Lieutenant García's dreams. Danger and violence now affect society indirectly (unlike in classic *testimonio*) and are manifested strongly in these dreams that go beyond the lieutenant's control. For example, on one occasion he dreams that he is travelling with his wife in a bus and suddenly a child boards holding a knife that is "larga como un cuchillo de carnicería" and declares to the passengers: "Me van a perdonar ... pero me tienen que dar toda la plata" (72). García's wife gives him a stack of hundred-quetzal notes, and García himself hands over another large amount from his wallet. When the child gets off the bus, García tells his wife: "Nos robó como mil quetzals. Pensá vos todo lo que hubiéramos podido comprar con eso" (73). In another dream, he sees himself playing football, but just as he is about to kick the ball he feels he cannot move because in place of his legs are two sacks of flour. He wants to move, as he sees the goalkeeper, "el gordo Juanito," approaching and his friend Alvarez shouts "Movete, vos, pisado! ... Pero como las piernas no daban de sí, le lanzó una manotada al gordo" (34). These dreams demonstrate a sense of danger but also show an inability to do anything about it; they ridicule the lieutenant and his powerlessness. The army, which claims to protect the state from subversion, cannot stop a child who takes everything from him and runs away. And García's dreamlike inability to kick the ball when it is right in front of him, to the frustration of his team mates, reinforces the weakness of an army that claims to be strong and to protect the nation.

In both dreams we notice that the lieutenant's strength and power are questioned and challenged. As with classic *testimonio*, this text demonstrates the violence instigated by the army or the state that is powerful and oppresses the common people in the society. Yet, unlike the testimonial genre, the dreams in *El hombre de Montserrat* challenge, subvert, and ridicule this very state's power and strength. Thus, the story's fictional elements help us to understand the

state's vulnerability and blur the line between fact and fiction. *El hombre de Montserrat*, like *Insensatez* and *El asco*, portrays the harsh realities such as violence that bring us closer to the description of the testimonial genre, while also incorporating a fictional, dreamlike logic that takes the liberty not only to ridicule authority but to give an insight into the workings and the susceptibility of the state. The novel reverses the terms of the testimonial genre which showed us a victim in the hands of the army, in that now it is the state that plays the role of the victim in this text. We see, therefore, that this fiction critiques the past forms of the *testimonio* as a genre; even as, like the other texts, it continues to repeat the characteristics of that genre.

2.2.2 Literature versus Testimonio

Literary elements were always present in texts that were read as *testimonio* during the eighties (as we now see testimonial elements in contemporary fiction). However, they were seldom the focus of attention for most of those analysing these tales. Classic *testimonios* were generally read as narrations of struggle, violence and marginalization, addressing serious issues that needed immediate attention. Yet some critics such as Elzbieta Sklodowska did consider the presence of literary devices in Menchú's *testimonio*: "where Stoll spots lies and fabrications, I see allegories and metaphors" ("The Poetics of Remembering" 256). Literary elements were present in classic *testimonios*, as I will further discuss in the following chapter; the repetitions of such devices in today's fiction demonstrates its similarity with the genre. Contemporary texts do not only repeat similar literary devices, but as a result they challenge the idea of literature and *testimonio* as separate categories that cannot be connected.

Humour is one characteristic that is apparently against the nature of *testimonio* as a genre. Yet Vega's complaints about Salvadoran society, and his narration of what he goes through during his stay in the country, come across as humour. Vega maintains a serious tone when he

expresses his frustration and anger towards contemporary Salvadoran society, but the words that he uses and the examples that he gives to Moya are humorous. He tells Moya about a conversation that he has with his brother, Ivo, who has told him to establish himself in El Salvador by opening an institute of history: “así me lo dijo, Moya, sin reírse, te aseguro que no se estaba burlando de mí, hablaba en serio, hasta lamentó que en el negocio de las llaves y la cerrajería ya hubiera tanta competencia, a diferencia de la historia del arte, donde yo tendría todo el camino despejado para mí solito” (*El asco* 57). He tells Moya about his brother’s advice very seriously, showing his anger at his brother’s idea or notion about his profession, yet the way that he tells it makes the reader smile at Ivo’s folly and Vega’s inability to confront his brother.

Insensatez also confronts the definition of the *testimonio* genre that subordinates literary value to purported truth. According to Beverley, “unlike the novel, testimonio promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness” (“The Margin at the Center”). However, throughout Castellanos Moya’s novel, the narrator establishes a collection of snippets of the *testimonios* he is reading, comparing them to literature rather than being overly preoccupied with their “sincerity.” For instance, he reads aloud lines that he has noted down from the *testimonios* to his friend Toto, a poet, and describes them as “cápsulas concentradas de dolor ... cuyas frases tenían tal sonoridad, fuerza y profundidad que yo había apuntado ya algunas de ellas en mi libreta personal” (*Insensatez* 30). He further addresses Toto as a poet who will be interested in these poetic phrases: “Escucha esta lindura, vos que sos poeta.” Yet at some point he realizes that Toto is not interested in the poetic lines as he sadly notes: “Y lo observé de nuevo, porque ahora sí tenía que haber encajado esos versos que para mí expresaban toda la desolación después de la masacre, pero no para mi compadre Toto, más agricultor que poeta, como descubrí con pena” (*Insensatez* 31). Another example that again proves the narrator’s

appreciation of the *testimonios* more as literature than in terms of their sincerity, is when he compares their style with that of the Peruvian poet César Vallejo: “esas intensas figuras de lenguaje y en la curiosa construcción sintáctica que me recordaba a poetas como el peruano César Vallejo” (*Insensatez* 32). Elsewhere, he defines the reading of *testimonio* as literary: “aquellas frases que me parecían estupendas literariamente, que jamás volvería a compartir con poetas insensibles como mi compadre Toto y que con suerte podría utilizar posteriormente en algún tipo de collage literario” (*Insensatez* 43). Rodríguez notes that: “La tentación de novelar los datos, de convertir la historia en ficción, es lo que promueve la substracción de las frases poéticas, pero a la vez el narrador-editor se da cuenta de que lo que está haciendo es leer el testimonio del sufrimiento histórico como ficción, no como represión política sino como creación estética” (36). These examples thus raise questions about the definitions that were invoked in the past in the stark comparison between literature and *testimonio*. They also demonstrate that like *El asco* and *El hombre de Montserrat*, *Insensatez* should be open to be interpreted differently by its readers—it can be read as fiction as well as *testimonio* (just like the classic *testimonios*). Approaching this text both as fiction and *testimonio* demonstrates that literature and *testimonio* can exist simultaneously in one text without erasing or dominating the other. Instead, it retains the complexity of the text.

Insensatez subverts the testimonial genre from the perspective of a compiler who “no está completo de la mente,” (13) who is more interested in appreciating the literariness of the texts that he is reading than in looking for their truth value, sincerity, or authenticity. The novel also shows a tension between the protagonist, who enjoys reading the *testimonios*, and his colleagues who do not. His colleague Pilar, for instance, who seems to be very serious and dedicated in her job, loses interest when the narrator reads a fragment from a *testimonio*; his friend Toto, a poet,

also loses interest during his recitation of the fragments. Moreover, the Monsignor and the church director, Mynor, react strangely when the narrator recites a phrase from his notebook:

Monseñor se me quedó viendo con una mirada indescifrable tras sus gafas de cristales ahumados y montura de carey, una mirada que me hizo temer que él me considerara un literato alucinado en busca de versos donde lo que había era una brutal denuncia de los crímenes de lesa humanidad perpetrados por el ejército contra las comunidades indígenas de su país, que él pensara que yo era un mero estilista que pasaba por alto el contenido del informe, por lo que me abstuve de leer frase y más bien comencé a hablar de la estructura y del capitulado, del enfoque psico-social y de la clasificación de las afecciones mentales de las víctimas. (68-69)

The restrictions that framed the testimonial genre during the eighties and nineties continue to impose upon contemporary readings, in terms of injunctions against exploring literary aspects in the *testimonio* genre or testimonial aspects in literature. This quote further divides the way we approach literary works and other fields of social sciences. It makes us wonder why there is a need to ignore the stylistic approach in traumatic *testimonios*. Why cannot we appreciate and focus on the literary aspects and on the traumatic events in the same text? Ortiz Wallner states that “el narrador va a vivir en aislamiento esta admiración y fascinación, pues no encontrará interlocutores con quienes compartir la forma en que estas frases le afectan. Nadie le escucha, nadie se interesa” (*El arte de ficcionar* 154). But these factors (literary versus *testimonio*, fact versus fiction) are questioned and subverted here, as the novel’s narrator critiques the perception of reading a text as *testimonio* within the canon and, therefore, juxtaposes his interest in the literary aspects of the account and others’ reaction to it when he recites the phrases to them.

2.2.3 Torture and Oppression

Another important aspect of reading a text as *testimonio* is the description of violence and oppression. *Testimonio* seems incomplete without these factors, and without the subaltern struggle against such injustice. In *Insensatez*, the narrator reads of state torture, the victims' losses, and the pain that the indigenous people experienced. Such descriptions in the text can be found not only through the phrases that the narrator notes down but also through a detailed discussion of the various testimonial accounts that he is compiling. For instance, he mentions the *testimonio* of a girl tortured by the army so that she confesses that she works for the guerrilla and denounces the names of her comrades. Yet the authorities knew she was not involved with the guerrilla and that her only offense was that she was the daughter of a labor lawyer who was murdered a few months later. The narrator describes this as "un testimonio contado con tanto detalle y tan impactante que me había obligado a abandonar la oficina de monseñor donde yo trabajaba en busca de aire y emociones menos malsanas" (108). Besides the cruelty, brutality, and inhumanity shown by the state towards its citizens, this example also demonstrates the impact that *testimonio* can have on its readers. The description forces the narrator to leave his office in search of some fresh air. This indicates the intention behind reading a text as *testimonio*, as *testimonio* depicts social injustice and has the capacity to affect the reader so much so that it destabilizes her/him mentally. It further forces the reader to think about those injustices that people in another place experience and react to them.

The differences in the approaches to narrating oppression and torture can be found in *El hombre de Montserrat*. In this story, too, we see elements of social violence and danger, though it is implied that people are quite used to the condition of the country. *El hombre de Montserrat* begins with the description of the life of a lieutenant and his family; it describes the chaotic

situation in Guatemala during the last phase of the civil war, the killings and the mishaps. We note the daily urban violence, though the narrator focuses on García's calm demeanour:

A lo lejos, en la ciudad, una sirena se fue desenrollando. «¿Quién será el desgraciado?», pensó. Casi enseguida, oyó el desgranarse de unas ametralladoras. Otros respondían al fuego. Oyó un retumbo y reconoció el sonido de la Granada de mano. Después, otra. Luego, el fuego cruzado de las ametralladoras. Dos, tres bombazos. Inmediatamente, el silencio. Pocos tiros aislados. «Se acabó la escaramuza», pensó. (35)

The fact that violence is still a part of society forces us to reconsider whether testimonial reading is truly over. This text (like the others) bridges the gap between fiction and *testimonio* and demonstrates a continuity between the past and the present. However, since there is a change in period (from the time of civil war to the epoch of neoliberalism), the issues and concerns have altered.¹⁷ As these texts show, Central American societies are now increasingly used to daily violence and disorder. These texts seek both to document that sense that people have been inured to what was once traumatic, and to recover a lost sense of shock and outrage, which was a primary motivation for classic *testimonio*. We will see, in the next section, the preoccupations of the current fiction that can be related to *testimonio*.

Oppression, violence, and injustice, which were the key factors of the testimonial genre, continue to feature also in contemporary texts. Can we then really say that the moment of *testimonio* is over? Can these texts not be read as *testimonio*? Do they suggest that *testimonio* as a technique to approach literature exists even today in Central America? In the next section we will see how each text shows the validity of reading *testimonio* in the post-civil war era yet

¹⁷ By post-war, I mean after the peace agreements in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996). Arturo Arias notes more generally that “the 1990s pointed to the beginning of a new period in Central American history, one dating from the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in February 1990” (*Taking Their Word* 3).

demonstrates the limitations of the ways in which we have defined and understood the genre.

These texts take core aspects of the testimonial genre and subvert them, at the same time as they claim to be *testimonios* themselves. They show us fresh ways to approach literature as *testimonio* (or *testimonio* as literature).

2.2.4 *The Compiler and the Witness*

Like classic *testimonios*, contemporary fictional works establish a relation between a compiler and a witness, which in turn makes the text a dialogue between two or more people instead of a monologue. However, these works also challenge the role of the compiler as an intellectual and therefore his or her supposedly “superior” position from which to judge and organize the witness’s testimony. The notion of the presence of the intellectual in *testimonio* is meant to give a platform to the subaltern voice, but it marks off the intellectual from the marginalized and the unlettered. It suggests that though the subaltern perspective is important, it has to be monitored, mediated, and even corrected by scholars.

El asco has aspects of what defined the reading of *testimonio* in the eighties and nineties. The text is narrated in the first person by Vega to his friend and compiler Moya. Alongside his personal narrative, Vega talks about El Salvador and comments on the country’s post-war situation. Characteristics of *testimonio* as a genre that can be found in this text include orality—evidenced with the use of long, sometimes repetitious sentences as in classic *testimonio*—a first person narrative, and a preoccupation for the country’s socio-political condition. Further, we can also observe the presence of a compiler and a witness, whereby the witness narrates the story to the compiler and the compiler in turn compiles it for the readers.

In the case of *El hombre de Montserrat*, this is a tale narrated in the third person, but from the perspective of Lieutenant García. As in classic *testimonio*, here the narrator tells

García's story and relates it to the wider community, even as the perspective or point of view of analyzing events and incidents that have occurred in the community remains with the narrator. It is through Lieutenant García that the reader has access to his world or to his society. Valeria Grinberg Pla highlights the use of third person narrative voice in her discussion of the text:

Junto con la provocativa decisión de focalizar la narración en la experiencia de un militar, uno de los rasgos más interesantes de esta novela es—a mi entender—la ausencia de una voz narrativa que juzgue las acciones del Teniente García en particular, o de los militares en general. Por el contrario, el narrador de *El hombre de Montserrat* nos sumerge en el mundo de los personajes, especialmente del protagonista, por lo que nosotros, los lectores, vemos el acontecer socio-político de Guatemala a través de sus ojos. (“La est/ética de la guerra” 21)

Though the narration of the story is not in the first person speaking on behalf of the community, in the style of classic *testimonio*, the narrative still fulfills its role of introducing to its readers the social and political problems of Guatemala from an individual point of view—that of lieutenant García. Yet, since the narrator does not provide his own opinion about the protagonists, this helps the readers to form their own idea about the characters as well as the story.

These two texts challenge narrative hierarchy and the relationship between the compiler and the witness. Classic *testimonio* arose from a dialogue between compiler and witness that was then presented to its readers as the witness's first-person narrative, with the role of the compiler subordinated to forewords and footnotes. The witness's story was presented on its own terms and readers may fail to notice the fact that the *testimonio* was a mediated text; that the story had been told first to a compiler who then organized and even “corrected” it.

In *El asco*, the act of re-telling and shaping the witness's story is brought to the fore, and the novel draws our attention to the complexity of the narrative style involved in reading *testimonio*. Here, the reader is aware from the beginning that the text is mediated. For the compiler's voice is more active in Castellanos Moya's novel than it is elsewhere: he is narrating to the reader the story that Vega has told him. Though the tale he tells is narrated in the first person, from the outset reader realizes that this is a mediated text and that they are not receiving the narration directly from the narrator or witness, but only as it is interpreted by another person. Moreover, in this case, the compiler is another character in the text itself: Moya is Vega's childhood friend. Elsewhere, in most classic testimonial texts, the compiler only comes to know and understand the witness from the story that he or she narrates (as he or she compiles it). Here, however, the text's opening sentence makes readers aware of the book's narrative complexity: "Suerte que viniste, Moya, tenía mis dudas que vinieras, porque este lugar no le gusta a mucha gente en esta ciudad, hay gente a la que no le gusta nada este lugar, Moya, por eso no estaba seguro de si vos ibas a venir, me dijo Vega" (*El asco* 15). As critic Megan Thornton notes, the repeated use of the phrase "me dijo Vega" throughout the text makes the reader conscious of the compiler's presence: "Adding 'me dijo Vega' at the end explicitly marks Moya's presence in the conversation and makes clear his role as the transcriber of Vega's story, a presence that a traditional editor of the *testimonio* may hide" ("A Postwar Perversion" 209). *El asco* thus compels its readers to rethink the relationship between narrators and compilers. Do they have to get to know each other and build their friendship over time, or can there be an informal, friendly relationship even before the narrator decides to tell her or his story to the compiler?

This question leads us to another: must there be a hierarchy between compiler and narrator in testimonial readings?¹⁸ The principal characteristic defining *testimonio* in the eighties and nineties was that the witness should be an (effectively) illiterate person who narrated his or her story to a compiler who was literate, generally an intellectual, who edited, arranged, and organized the story so that it could be read across the world.¹⁹ But in *El asco*, both characters have studied at the same school; both are educated and well qualified. Thus, the text questions any demarcation of a hierarchy between witness and intellectual. In fact, Edgardo Vega is a professor at McGill University, Canada, while his compiler is a struggling writer in El Salvador. If anything, then, the hierarchy is reversed. The book questions the subalternity of the voice that is brought to our attention through the intellectual's intervention. All this again forces us to re-read *testimonio* in a new way. We should not restrict ourselves to the assumption that we will hear only subaltern voices or factual events in a text treated as *testimonio*, or unauthentic stories in texts treated as fictions. (In fact, there is always more than this.) Our readings should every time open up new possibilities of exploring testimonial elements in literature and literary elements in *testimonio*.

In *Insensatez*, the fact that the narrator collects key phrases from some of the *testimonios* he is reading is an interesting aspect that points at similarity while establishing difference. For the protagonist maintains a notebook where he notes down sentences that he likes from the *testimonios* that he is compiling. The novel's opening lines introduce the reader to this habit: "Yo

¹⁸ Beverley and Zimmerman explain that: "Since in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer or intellectual, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is journalist, writer, or social activist" (*Literature and Politics* 173).

¹⁹ There are, of course, exceptions or complications to this rule, such as *The Little School* and *La noche de Tlatelolco*. In *The Little School* the narrator is not indigenous or a factory worker but a university student. And *La noche de Tlatelolco* features a variety of informants, including students, administrators, army officers, and professors. Yes, but *The Little School* is a compilation of testimonial short stories, that is, a hybrid genre.

no estoy completo de la mente, decía la frase que subrayé con el marcado amarillo y que hasta pasé en limpio en mi libreta personal” (*Insensatez* 13). This act of annotation can be related to the characteristic of classic *testimonio* wherein the intellectual, ethnographer, or compiler records, edits, and organizes an oral account that is later presented in written form.²⁰ It also, however, highlights the presence of the compiler’s voice in *testimonio*, foregrounding the fact that there is a medium between the witness and the readers. Thus, contemporary fiction demonstrates that witnesses’ testimony never reaches its readers without some kind of intervention; instead, such stories are mediated at various levels. Moreover, in this text the narrator further challenges this aspect (the relationship between compiler and witness) by linking the phrase “*yo no estoy completo de la mente*” to himself. He identifies with this phrase and therefore warns readers to be cautious that his compilation may not be entirely trustworthy.

The notion that first-person narrative should be one of *testimonio*’s defining factors (at it is, for instance, for Beverley) is also problematized in *Insensatez*. For instance, the narrator comes across the *testimonio* of a man who, literally speechless, dumb, was nonetheless tortured by the army to confess the names of other collaborators of the guerrilla, and was beaten for his silence in front of the rest of his village: “el sargento comenzará a infringirle incisiones en el cuerpo con el yatagan, a los gritos de «!habla, indio hijo de la gran puta, antes de que me calientes los huevos!», pero el mudito nada más abría desorbitadamente los ojos de tal forma que parecía que saldrían de sus cuencas a causa del terror” (*Insensatez* 28). This *testimonio* definitely was not told by the dumb man, but by some other person who must have witnessed the event and relayed his expressions. Subsequently, the compiler tells the story to his friend and in turn to the

²⁰ John Beverley states: “Because in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer, the production of a *testimonio* generally involves tape-recording and then transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is an intellectual, often a journalist or a writer” (“The Margin at the Center” 26).

novel's readers, since it is through his narration that we come to know about the incident. He adds that this was "un sargento bastante bruto si consideramos que destazó al mudito sin darse cuenta de que esos gritos no eran solo de dolor, sino de un mudito para quien esa era su única forma de expresión" (29). *Insensatez* therefore makes us think twice not only about what is said in *testimonio* (expressions through words or through sounds) but also how it questions both content and form as it makes us reassess the ways in which we approach such narratives. In the form: the book shows that these narratives do not reach the readers directly,²¹ but they traverse other layers before reaching an interlocutor. Further, it makes us wonder whether the compiler's work can be fully trusted, and, in the content, it makes us wonder how we can analyze and approach these texts by not dividing them between fact and fiction or literature and *testimonio*. Contemporary narratives such as *Insensatez* address the complexity of the testimonial form (as well as the fictional form) and ask the reader to consider whether texts like *Insensatez* might also be read as *testimonio*.

Castellanos Moya's narrator clarifies, moreover, through his repeated quotation and appreciation of phrases taken from indigenous testimony, that in fact there is little need to edit or organize these *testimonios*, however uneducated or even illiterate their authors. They have a power of their own. Asked by the director of the Archbishopric about the quality of the texts he has found, the narrator answers that: "la calidad no era el problema sino la cantidad" (38). Indeed, the narrator repeatedly challenges the hierarchical division between witness and compiler. As he puts it on one occasion: "*Lo que pienso es que pienso yo ... , carajo, o esta otra, Tanto en sufrimiento que hemos sufrido tanto con ellos ... , cuya musicalidad me dejó perplejo*

²¹ John Beverley notes that "as *testimonio* implies a new kind of relation between narrator and reader, the contradictions of sex, class, race, and age that frame the narrative's production can also reproduce themselves in the relation of narrator to this direct interlocutor" ("The Margin at the Center" 30).

desde el primer momento, cuya calidad poética era demasiada como para no sospechar que procedía de un gran poeta y no de una anciana indígena que con ese verso finalizaba su desgarrador testimonio que ahora no viene al caso” (*Insensatez* 43). Here, the narrator appreciates the literariness of the testimonial genre and at the same time is stunned by the way these indigenous people have described their trauma. The narrator focuses both on the horrific events that occurred in the indigenous communities and on their capability to narrate such incidents in a poetic manner.

2.2.5 Solidarity, Victimhood, and Marginalization

Solidarity, victimhood, and marginalization have been important in reading and defining a text as *testimonio* in so far as this is a genre classically tied to the notion of subaltern voice.

Contemporary fiction repeats these features, but experiments with different ways of viewing them. Such novels today question whether these elements are applicable only to the poor and the oppressed or might be extended also to intellectuals and even representatives of the state. *El asco*, for instance, challenges the concepts of solidarity or patriotism. In classic *testimonio* the witness’s primary motivation was love for her or his nation and its people. But Vega hates being Salvadoran, and any relationship with the country. His hatred towards El Salvador is such that he even changes his name from Edgardo Vega to Thomas Bernhard, as he explains to his friend, Moya: “un nombre que tomé de un escritor austriaco al que admiré y que seguramente ni vos ni los demás simuladores de esta infame provincial conocen” (*El asco* 126). Vega/Bernhard goes so far as to claim that he does not care about either the country or its people. This is a subversion of *testimonio* as a genre for which struggle was premised on loving one’s nation and, more importantly, one’s people. Hence the concept of solidarity is questioned.

As in classic *testimonio*, here the narrator begins by introducing himself and his family, but unlike in such texts this introduction is far from a survey of his childhood, his activity within the community, his awakening to the fact of exploitation, and therefore his struggle to make a better society in solidarity with his peers. In fact, Vega criticizes his childhood and his education in El Salvador. His description of the country and his life there comes across as frustrating; he seems to be relieved when he leaves for Canada. If this is *testimonio*, it is the testimony of someone for whom struggle, revolution, change, progress, subalternity, or equality are not the prime factors. It challenges the stereotyped ideas created by Western academia about El Salvador—that everybody living there is a revolutionary, struggling for a better society and believing in such ideas. His cynicism about exploitation, struggle and solidarity on the one hand makes us question his beliefs for establishing a just society and, on the other hand, make us reconsider the homogenizing assumptions with which we approached *testimonio*. Our readings of *testimonio* focused particularly on these notions and ignored the specificities of individual text.

El asco could provide a perfect instance of Alberto Moreiras's argument that *testimonio* does not depend only on subaltern voice or on solidarity.²² Rather, we seek a new approach to *testimonio* that does not confine it to any one single (and particular) mode of reading. We must read *testimonio* not "solely" (Moreiras 196) focusing on commonplaces, but exploring other elements as well. I argue that such elements include transnationalism, suspense, thrill, and humour. Further, Gareth Williams argues that themes such as solidarity, resistance, leading a life

²² "The contemporary attraction of *testimonio* for literary or postliterary reflection does not depend solely on the fact that *testimonio* introduces suppressed and subaltern voices into disciplinary discourse; it does not solely depend on the welcome possibility of articulating, through disciplinary discourse, a political praxis of solidarity and coalition; and it does not depend on the intriguing promise of expansion of disciplinary discourse to cultural practices that seem to threaten as much as they revitalize discussions about what exactly constitutes literature" ("The Aura of *Testimonio*" 196).

close to nature, or harmony have become fantasies that North American intellectuals wanted to possess. Williams describes them in terms of the “disciplinary fantasy” of “Latinamericanist enjoyment.” He explains that “the Latin American subaltern becomes everything the United States lacks and craves in order for it to think itself” (“Fantasies of Cultural Exchange” 244). Thus, factors like subaltern voice or solidarity (that Moreiras argues are not the only elements of *testimonio*) can be those factors that the United States “lacks and craves.”

Moreover, the anti-disciplinary or anti-hegemonic elements that supposedly defined *testimonio* as a genre have not altered the relationship between centre and periphery; *testimonio* still operates at the margin. The testimonial genre, according to Williams, still functions within the same center-periphery relation. *Testimonio* gained its momentum as a narrative form that was said to challenge dominant literary structures—novels, autobiography and so on, written mostly by upper-class, white male writers. Yet it failed to subvert that structure. In other words, *testimonio* as a genre fulfilled the role of the “periphery” in that it helped the “centre” to define itself and helped North American intellectuals to confront aspects of their own culture, but it did not denounce the centre, not least its ideas about the place and the role of the periphery. In short, whatever change was associated with *testimonio*, cast as the voice of the subaltern, hardly altered the fate of the subaltern itself (though as we have seen in the first chapter that testimonial reading initially raised awareness in the academia). However, I argue that it was our *reading* of *testimonio*, or our approach towards *testimonio*, that confined the genre to the “periphery” or the margins, ignoring the real challenge of what it had to say.

Contemporary fictional texts challenge our preconceptions of *testimonio*. For example, Liano’s *El Hombre de Montserrat* inverts the role assigned to the witness in the testimonial genre. In this story, the witness is neither indigenous nor marginalized; he is no subaltern. Here,

Lieutenant Carlos García is a representative of the state, a perpetrator of injustice, recounting his own experience, his own fears and suffering. The text addresses the protagonist's victimization, which is another characteristic of testimonial genre in the twentieth century. We have often read about the ruthlessness and cruelty of the state that sowed terror among the people, but this text gives us a notion of the fear that those in power feel when they have to face the guerrilla. Thus, testimonial reading need not address the victimhood of *campesinos*, factory workers or coffee plantation peons; this contemporary fiction subverts this notion in its articulation of the fear of an army officer. For instance, when García is ordered to the jungle, he compares it to the city: “porque no era solo la selva, sino también la Guerra. Lo que pasaba en la ciudad era juguete, comparado con eso. Juguete, porque lo hacían otros. La selva era el puro frente. Enfrentarse con guerrilleros” (99). He describes the guerrilla as:

entre hormigas y zompos. Pero, eso sí, millones. Miles de hormigas todas juntas que se convertían en una sábana negra. Donde pasaban, dejaban todo pelón. Flores, árboles, plantas grandes y chicas, todo se lo hartaban. Y si, por caso, algún animal les quedaba en el camino, ya que estuviera muerto o enfermo, dejaban solo el hueso mondo. No había árbol alto ni agujero profundo adonde no llegaran. (96)

The guerrillas are compared to ants; ants that might not be harmful individually but that are dangerous as a group: “no las vieron una por una, sino que era como un enorme monstruo negro, que hervía y se movía imparables” (97). Perhaps surprisingly, this perspective on the guerrilla comes from the institution of the army, the state, and describes the terror of those who serve it when they have to face the guerrilla.

This text gives an account of life in the city and the jungle alike from the perspective of an oppressor who is (playing the role of) a victim, unlike anything we are accustomed to seeing

in texts framed by our normal preconceptions of the testimonial genre. Yet García, despite having the upper hand in so many ways, is indeed also marginalized and victimized. As mentioned earlier, *El hombre de Montserrat* is not just an account of García's life: the plot unfolds around the mysterious death of his brother-in law, Ramón. Here is the connection with the "man on Montserrat" referenced in the book's title: a man whose body is found on Montserrat Street. This death and Ramón's murder are linked, as it emerges that it was the man who was killed on Montserrat Street who murdered Ramón. However, García is the last to know about this discovery and the connection between the two deaths; it is his other brother-in law, Toño, who informs him. Toño is involved with a guerrilla group through which he is able to find out about the man who killed Ramón, but now the army is looking for him so that his name can be added to the list of the disappeared.

Lieutenant García is sent to fight in the jungle to repay the army for the favor of sending his brother-in-law away to Mexico so as to extricate him from this mysterious murder case. Ortiz Wallner remarks that "a pesar de trabajar en el departamento de inteligencia militar, nunca da con la identidad del fallecido, mientras que los demás—incluyendo al ejército, la policía judicial y a su propia familia—, saben más que él e incluso se lo ocultan" (*El arte de ficcionar* 149). Hence, the narrative challenges the reading strategy encouraged by classic *testimonio* for which the victim is always a subaltern. We see that this is not necessarily so: *testimonio* can tell the story of a figure of authority who is marginalized or victimized within the system itself. Indeed, the question of what makes someone a victim, including the sense of being a puppet in the hands of other powerful people, is a central object of reflection for the story.

García believes himself to be a powerful army officer. For example, in one scene a house is burnt down, and as the people in the house are killed and from his own house García listens in

the night to the exchange of fire, he feels himself to be controlling the city. However, as he tries to solve the mystery of Ramón's murder, we see the other side of the coin that is the larger conspiracy within the army to which García falls prey. The institution has hidden from him the murder on Montserrat Street since it involves his family. He has been discarded or sidelined by the very force that makes him feel so powerful. When García goes to meet Matamoros, the boss of the judicial police, he notices the cheap material from which the police officer's uniform is made: "el traje del Jefe de la Judicial era de tela barata, cien por ciento poliéster, de color marrón con rayitas doradas, de esos que cuando hay calor hierve y, cuando frío, congela" (64). This confirms his own sense of superiority, comfort, and power by comparison with such a lowly official: "El Teniente García se sintió orgulloso de la diferencia que había entre el Ejército y la policía. «Mientras nosotros trabajamos con computadora, estos todavía joden a la gente candela», pensó, mientras entraba a la oficina de Matamoros" (64). However, for all the pride he takes in his role in the army and therefore in his superiority over the boss of the judicial police, García later realizes that Matamoros also took part in covering up the facts behind the death of the man on Montserrat. The discussion between the two of them opens with García invoking his own authority to ask why this death has not been reported to his office, but later he starts to feel that it is Matamoros, his inferior, who is instead interrogating *him* about the murder:

—Un muerto que se hallaron en Montserrat.

—¿Y usted como lo sabe?

—Porque yo me lo encontré.

—Y entonces, ¿Por qué no informó usted mismo?

—Porque solo lo vi y se lo dejé a unos hombres suyos.

—¿Está seguro?

En eso, García se dio cuenta de que estaba respondiendo a un interrogatorio. (66)

García is surprised to learn from Matamoros that the entire incident was purposefully hidden from him by the army. But this is just another twist in a larger story in which the highest and most powerful institution in the country, and its decorated and honoured representatives, appear to be powerless and mocked.

The marginalization and powerlessness of those thought to be in authority often reveal themselves in Lieutenant García's dreams. He realizes his impotence as he dreams that he is incapable of kicking a football or that he is helpless to avoid being robbed by a young boy on the bus. Liano's novel ridicules the strength and power of those in positions of authority, unlike classic *testimonios*, which mostly concentrated on the oppression enacted by the army and so emphasized (if anything, even exaggerated) the state's power and capacity. *El hombre de Montserrat* thus subverts the testimonial genre at various levels.²³ Apart from questioning the role of the narrator, it also subverts the genre in that the story is narrated from the point of view of the state at the same time as it tends to undermine the constitution of an authority that claims and appears to be so very powerful and dangerous in classic testimonial texts. Liano's novel focuses on the powerlessness, hollowness, and incapacity of the state, so as to ridicule all claims to authority.

This aspect of ridicule is important. Contemporary Central American fiction shares or mimics characteristics of classic *testimonio*, but it also *parodies* both the earlier texts and the seriousness with which we took them (and with which they took themselves). In other words,

²³ There is of course a notable difference between *El hombre de Montserrat*, published in 1994, and the other texts I am discussing, published in the late nineties and early twenty-first century respectively--*El asco* in 1996 and *Insensatez* in 2004--in that the first of these still registers the presence of war, and combat between army and guerrilla. In the later works, the presence of the war in the narrative fades away, even as other forms of violence persist.

such fiction pays homage to the testimonial genre by continuing to use its narrative tools, thus emphasizing continuities between the past and present, which is all the more vital in the epoch of a neoliberalism that sets out to distance the past from present and to deny the weight of the past upon us. But in doing so, such texts also critique the very narrative tools and strategies that they preserve and reuse: novels such as *El asco* and *El hombre de Montserrat* question the rigid framework that has stifled (and ultimately seemed to exhaust) classic *testimonio*. They suggest instead other ways to read, and so resurrect, the genre (and by reading the current fictions as *testimonio* we are again showing the diverse manner of approaching these texts). At the same time, they respond to a new set of circumstances: today Central America is free from civil war; today the state is not the only all-powerful institution. Instead, it is the market that shares power with the state. These contemporary texts address neoliberalism and the transition from state to market.

2.3 From State to Market

Testimonio in Central America found its momentum during civil wars in which the state inflicted atrocities and the army responded with violence against various marginalized groups that dared to resist. Classic *testimonios* of the eighties and nineties were a means to describe such factors among others. Contemporary fiction, read as *testimonio*, addresses a new context in which it is the market that plays a dominant role. However, Brett Levinson argues that the shift from the state violence to the market²⁴ is not a mere transfer of power: now it is “the sovereign state ..., in tandem with the market” (4), that controls Central American society. Thus, these texts depict a

²⁴ Did it really shift? In Levinson’s words: “in recent years the universe has witnessed a swing from a disciplinary society (a mode of state power) to a control society (the mode of globalization), the assertion must be questioned. In fact, it is neither the state nor the market but their interplay, a state/market duopoly ... that sustains and explains both” (*Market and Thought* 4).

society that may no longer be at war, but for which peace is far from the utopia once imagined. Indeed, in some ways it may even be worse. As the narrator in *El asco* says of El Salvador: “si ya era espantosa antes de que yo me largara, si ya era insoportable hace dieciocho años, ahora es vomitivo” (26).

Throughout *El asco*, the narrator’s views are posed against those of ordinary Salvadorans. His complaints echo Levinson’s argument that “this transition marks, not the advent of a better state, but the completion of a neoliberal process (which commenced prior to the dictatorships), one in which liberty from terror (dictatorship) and ‘deeper’ entrance into the market (a.k.a. democracy), freedom itself and free trade, become synonymous” (*Market and Thought* 5). *El asco* depicts El Salvador’s transition from a society controlled by the state to one in which the market dominates. A country that fought against authoritarianism for the establishment of a just society is now being led by the market in terms of its cultural, political, social, and ideological aspects. For example, Vega talks to Moya about his younger brother, Ivo, who is a businessman and deals in making copies of keys. He calls his brother crazy and a lunatic, someone who is obsessed with making money and becoming rich. Vega indicates a new aspiration in Salvadoran society (especially the upper class): an obsession with accumulating wealth.

Vega shows how the market dominates El Salvador and degrades culture. He attacks El Salvador’s traditional food—corn tortillas stuffed with cheese or beans known as *pupusas*—and tells Moya that only hunger and ignorance can explain why they should be considered the country’s national dish. Vega says that El Salvador has no room for the appreciation of art and literature and that its only obsession is to accumulate wealth. Everyone wants to be a manager. People like to invest their money in institutions that can train managers to earn profit. Ivo suggests that Vega think seriously about cashing in by opening an institution of history of art in

San Salvador. After all he would hardly have any competition, since there would be nobody as qualified and experienced as Vega. This demonstrates the shift that has taken place in Salvadoran society: the dominant position that the market enjoys along with the state, and how this “duopoly”²⁵ rules society and manipulates its orientation so much so that the nation starts identifying with the culture of the market and considers it as its own. Levinson states: “the market is the only possible path to freedom” (5); this culture operated and promoted by the market, as the culture of a “free” Salvadoran society, led its people out of the civil war but into the neoliberal world which is seen as the only “free” world today.

Ivo, and his family and friends, represent a particular section of the society that is the object of Vega’s critique. Vega attacks the middle class or the class that aspires to become rich and live in the capital, San Salvador, not peasants or factory workers. He points to the urban youth who want to be managers, also to businessmen like his brother, obsessed with how to expand their businesses, and to women like Ivo’s wife whose only wish is to appear in the social pages of the newspaper. He denounces the doctors, who are corrupt, and the politicians, who are ignorant, illiterate, and who know neither how to read nor how to talk in public.²⁶ Vega describes the military and leftist parties alike as murderers and criminals motivated only by the desire to acquire money by sacrificing the lives of innocent people who fight for them. Ex-guerrillas and unemployed ex-soldiers alike now simply loot, murder, and rob. Vega’s criticism of Salvadoran society leads us to review the past; his continuous comparison of past and present makes us aware of the legacy of the civil war in the neoliberal era. For example, Vega tells Moya: “que

²⁵ Brett Levinson states: “it is neither the state nor the market but their interplay, a state/market duopoly ... that sustains and explains both” (*Market and Thought* 4).

²⁶ “Los políticos de este país tienen especialmente atrofiada la capacidad de lectura, a la hora de hablar se les nota que desde hace tiempo no ejercen su capacidad de lectura, resulta evidente que lo peor que les podría suceder a los políticos es que alguien los obligara a leer en voz alta, sería tremendo” (*El asco* 31).

gusto el de la gente de este país de vivir aterrorizada, Moya, que gusto más mórbido vivir bajo el terror, que gusto más pervertido pasar del terror de guerra al terror de la delincuencia, un vicio patológico el de esta gente, un vicio mórbido hacer el terror su modo permanente de vida” (*El asco* 115). This shows that there is still no escape from domination. Misha Kokotovic notes also that two other Castellanos Moya novels likewise address the impact of neoliberalism on El Salvador: “*La diablo en el espejo* y *El arma en el hombre* carecen del idealismo del testimonio y no propone alternativas a la situación deprimente que describen. A pesar de esto, critican ferozmente el neoliberalismo salvadoreño de la posguerra” (“Neoliberalismo y novela negra en la posguerra centroamericana” 202). Any hope for a peaceful post-war life is still a dream for Salvadoran society, only now this society is no longer aware of its real issues; instead, as Vega says, it takes pride in its problematic culture, and is busy acquiring wealth.

In *El hombre de Montserrat*, the market controls society by commodifying violence and making it available to people who can sit at home to consume it. Thus, violence and the fight against injustice are now merely sources of entertainment in Central America. Neoliberal society has succeeded in detaching emotions from such violent acts, which the market offers as a form of pleasure and recreation. Society is accustomed to violence. For instance, when Lieutenant García is at home and hears gunshots, he thinks back to when it used to sound strange and ominous to his family: “Oyó, mucho más lejos, otro tiroteo. De nuevo, una sirena rasgó el aire. Se acordó de la época en que todos esos ruidos despertaban a su mujer y no la dejaban dormir. Ahora solo la asustaban los temblores” (35). His tranquility is seen again in an incident in which the narrator describes the army’s violent destruction of a guerrilla safe-house in the city. The scene is described from the point of view of the binocular lenses through which García watches from a distance the firefight between army and guerrillas in the glare of the media. García thinks that “le

iban a hacer falta muchas borracheras para borrarse de la memoria lo que estaba viendo” (51). But the media has learned to subjugate all affect and express all this as simply another part of the routine: “El reportero, al lado de García, tenía la cara blanca y estaba temblando. Como contraste, la voz le salía limpia y profesional, sin reflexiones ni acentos” (51). The narrator highlights that today people can easily suppress their emotions or feelings. We are led to wonder whether in contemporary times people are truly affected by the violence against other human beings. Do the reporters in the media truly think about injustice, becoming emotional while transmitting such news and witnessing such a heinous crime? All this indicates how neoliberalism has entered the lives of the people, not just that in the way that it deforms culture as in the case of *El asco* or turns violence into a commodity as in the case of *El hombre de Montserrat*. What we have now is a society that is fundamentally unaffected by injustice.

Grinberg Pla comments on the consumption of violence by Guatemalan society in terms of: “el lugar que ocupan los telespectadores en su relato: estos son equiparados al pueblo de Guatemala, el cual se encuentra en su casa, sentado cómodamente frente al televisor, posiblemente bebiendo cerveza Gallo. Esta construcción invita a pensar que, si el pueblo guatemalteco no se involucra con la guerrilla, no será afectado por la violencia de la Guerra” (“La estética de la guerra” 27). Referring to another post-war Guatemalan novel by Rodrigo Rey Rosa (*Que me maten si...*), Kokotovic adds: “Esto sugiere que la impunidad del ejército tal vez no sea absoluta, pero también implica que se ha encontrado nuevos medios para asegurar que las estructuras fundamentales del poder en Guatemala seguirán inmunes a los cambios inaugurados por los acuerdos de paz” (197). As discussed earlier, the lack of affect among the characters in these texts distinguishes them from classic *testimonio*, for which trauma was highlighted by narrators and readers alike. But perhaps this is all the more reason to resurrect the genre.

Contemporary fiction shows a society that has adapted to the violence and danger of daily life, a society that now merely consumes the violence produced by the state and sold by the market. The dictatorship and the civil war have ended “but a dispersed and imaginary gaze monitors the social, inducing individuals to situate themselves within a correct order or site” (Levinson, *Market and Thought* 49). *El asco* and *El hombre de Montserrat* demonstrate the current reality of Guatemala and El Salvador, the repercussions of war and the role of the market today. In the private tranquillity of their own homes, the population can witness the effects of this violence, as the media makes violence available for the citizenry as a source of entertainment. Central American society is as dangerous as ever—if not more so—yet people are habituated to relax, even enjoy and get used to it.

Neoliberal society directs our wants and desires: in *El asco*, the market creates new cultural forms for the people and sells them as their own so that the people can take pride in them. But if we see these texts as parodies of *testimonio*, for all the critique that such an attitude suggests (refusing to honour even the most sacred of cows) it consistently reminds us of the role of *testimonio* during the time of the civil war. This gesture of relating contemporary Central American fiction to earlier classic texts helps us to value (or revalue) certain aspects of the past. It reminds us of the dream of making a just society, of the time when literature did indeed address injustice and identify crimes against humanity. People were once affected by the violence, and though today injustice has become a source of entertainment, blurring the distinction between right and wrong, violence and peace, contemporary Central American fiction’s burlesque of *testimonio* reminds us, through savage irony and subversion, that it was not always so. It tells us that we need to read the genre anew.

2.4 Parody and Postmodernism

El asco, *Insensatez*, and *El hombre de Montserrat* are contemporary works of fiction that can also be read as *testimonio*. But at the same time, they critique and question fundamental aspects of the testimonial genre. I propose this (questioning and critiquing) strategy as parody: they parody the *testimonio* as a genre. Seeing these texts in terms of parody helps establish a relation with the past. Parody enables a reflection on the history of *testimonio*, and the ways in which testimonial texts serve as one of the many foundations for and influences on contemporary fiction. It establishes a continuity and also a potential comparison between the past and the present—what has changed and what remains the same.

Parody, as Linda Hutcheon explains, is not only a means of ridicule but also a way to critique the background text against which a contemporary fiction has been set. However, parody does not simply set two texts against each other that interrelate in a certain way; rather, the kind of parody Hutcheon is talking about is “an integrated structural modeling process of revising, replaying, inverting and ‘trans-contextualizing’ previous works of art” (*A Theory of Parody* 11). It is not an imitation of the past but the creation of a new model; it gives a new meaning to the later text, it is complex and incorporates a critical reflection. Hutcheon states that “the auto-reflexivity of modern art forms often takes the form of parody and, when it does so, it provides a new model for artistic process” (*A Theory of Parody* 5). Difference and distanciation are the two important characteristics of parody, as it establishes the past as model, but at the same time critiques and subverts that model. As Hutcheon says, “parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies. This kind of authorized transgression is what makes it a ready vehicle for the political contradictions of postmodernism at large” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 97). It questions the past and its representation as we know it in the

present through fiction and other genres, but at the same time demonstrates continuity with the past.

The parodic features of *El asco*, *Insensatez*, and *El hombre de Montserrat* make us question whether the “moment of the testimonio” as a reading practice is really over. For parody links the past and the present and emphasizes connection and continuity between the two; it is only if that link breaks, that *testimonio* as a reading strategy will indeed be over. The contemporary reading sets itself against the traditional and subverts the generic aspects of *testimonio* that restricted its narrative style. Reading contemporary fiction as *testimonio*, then, can challenge the concept of the genre as it emerged in the eighties on the one hand and, on the other, can show how the testimonial impulse has been adapted to address the region’s current social and political situation; it insists on bringing back to life a genre or an approach (to narrative) once considered dead. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, citing architect Robert Stern: “in search for a wider base for form, the classical tradition offers a set of references that remain meaningful to the public and continue to demonstrate their compositional usefulness In recognizing this, we do not necessarily argue for a return to or revival of the past, but rather for recognition of the continuity of the past in the present” (*A Theory of Parody* 113). These fictional works demonstrate the continuity with the past when we read and compare them to the classic *testimonio*.

El asco, *El hombre de Montserrat*, and *Insensatez* can be termed postmodern in that they use “the reappropriated forms of the past to speak to a society, while still questioning it” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 12); according to Hutcheon, this is a characteristic of postmodern fiction, which she says “often thematizes this process of turning events into facts through the filtering and interpreting of archival documents” (54). Hutcheon adds that:

There are important parallels between the processes of history-writing and fiction-writing and among the most problematic of these are their common assumptions about narrative and about the nature of mimetic representation. The postmodern situation is that a “truth is being told, with ‘facts’ to back it up, but a teller constructs that truth and chooses those facts” (Foley 1986: 67). In fact, that teller—of story or history—also constructs those very facts by giving a particular meaning to events. Facts do not speak for themselves in either form of narrative: the tellers speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole. (56)

We can then say that classic *testimonios* which were defined as factual and authentic can be termed as “truth” constructed and supported by the facts carefully chosen by the narrator, like the contemporary fiction. Where *Insensatez*, for example, demonstrates such a “process of turning events into facts through the filtering and interpreting of archival documents” by building upon the report *Guatemala nunca más*, *El asco* and *El hombre de Montserrat* shift between fact, truth, and fiction “by making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole.” This relation between the earlier *testimonios* and post-war fiction demonstrates not only the complexity of classic *testimonios* (with their inclusion of literary elements) but also in contemporary fiction (in its incorporation of testimonial elements).

Hutcheon further argues that no single definition can encompass postmodernism, and she cites Brian McHale in so far as he “points out that every critic ‘constructs’ postmodernism in his or her own way from different perspectives, none more right or wrong than the others” (10).²⁷

²⁷ In turn, Fredric Jameson argues that “As for Postmodernism itself, I have not tried to systematize a usage or to impose any conveniently coherent thumbnail meaning, for the concept is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory. I will argue that, for good or ill, we cannot not use it. But my argument should also be taken to imply that every time it is used, we are under the obligation to rehearse those inner contradictions and to stage those representational inconsistencies and dilemmas; we have to work all that through every time around.

Hence contemporary Central American fiction can also be interpreted in various ways: it not only shows similarities with the testimonial genre but also (say) with mystery novels. They challenge the limitation of these texts read only under fictional banner. These literary works raise important social issues, but often through humour and an appreciation of the absurd. In fact, Rodríguez states in relation to *Insensatez*: “Por medio de esa primera frase de entrada [*yo no estoy completo de la mente*], el narrador-editor llega a la conclusión de que la totalidad de los habitantes de esa región no está completa de la mente; él mismo tampoco lo está. El estado mental general de locura y perturbación mental aterriza este texto justo en la psicosis postmoderna” (35). She further argues that the object of postmodernism “es repensar el proyecto de la modernidad desde la heterogeneidad. Su deber es preguntarse qué tipo y proporción de ella es necesario para convivir y qué hacer con lo que no podemos tolerar” (43). Fredric Jameson has his own understanding of postmodernism, but his ideas resonate with that of Hutcheon’s when he states that “Postmodernism is not something we can settle once and for all and then use with a clear conscience” (xxi). This is precisely what we have seen in these texts, and also what Hutcheon and Rodríguez are arguing. We notice that contemporary Central American fiction cannot be categorized definitively as “settle[d] once and for all” (as we shall further see in the arguments of Hutcheon and Jameson). These texts continue to provoke their readers to further reading and discussion.

When Hutcheon relates postmodernism with parody, she points out that we can understand the past only through its various representations and therefore that the representation of history becomes the history of representation: “the history of representation cannot be escaped

Postmodernism is not something we can settle once and for all and then use with a clear conscience. The concept, if there is one, has to come at the end, and not at the beginning, of our discussions of it. Those are the conditions—the only ones, I think, that prevent the mischief of premature clarification—under which this term can productively continue to be used” (*Postmodernism* xxi).

but it can be both exploited and commented on critically through irony and parody” (55). Parody, therefore, is one such way in which these texts become subversive; it challenges the defining characteristics of the testimonial genre and in that way, it also challenges the manipulation of the market to capitalize on *testimonio* as “authentic” voice of the subaltern, as a voice against literature and as a voice that promotes solidarity and resistance. Parody offers other ways to read *testimonio*—it addresses the issues that Central America continues to face, and it maintains the presence of *testimonio* as a reading strategy.

Hutcheon affirms that “there is continuum, but there is also ironic difference, difference induced by that very history” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 90). Yet Fredric Jameson differs: “we are now, in other words, in ‘intertextuality’ as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect and as the operator of a new connotation of ‘pastness’ and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history” (*Postmodernism* 20). Contemporary Central American fiction questions “real history”: not just “official” history, but also the (oppositional) history narrated and understood as *testimonio* during the civil wars. They question the perspective of the narrator in *testimonio*, the structure of the text and the issues that it raises. They reread “history” to challenge its status as the only form of understanding the region’s socio-political situation. Contemporary fiction destabilizes the “history” narrated as *testimonio* as the only source of understanding the past struggle. They explore other possibilities of understanding the past and the legacy that it leaves in today’s post-war epoch. Jameson also questions whether postmodernism may “imply any more fundamental change or break than the periodic style and fashion changes determined by an older high-modernist imperative of stylistic innovation?” (1). I argue that a “fundamental change” could not revive the reading strategy of *testimonio* that was once considered dead. A “fundamental change or break” could have brought

different kinds of strategies to explore art and literature but would have passed over the ongoing potential of *testimonio*. Since contemporary fiction emphasizes a connection with the past, it keeps the testimonial impulse alive. Yet it critiques that past to ask: have past issues been resolved? Are we at peace with the past? Can we bury the past and look towards the future? These fictional works focus on the continued presence of *testimonio*, but they also compel us to go beyond previous definitions and debates, to explore other possibilities in the genre.

2.5 Conclusion

Texts such as *El hombre de Montserrat*, *Insensatez*, and *El asco* consist of a plurality of narrative voices to evidence perhaps what Jameson describes as “the disappearance of the individual subject,” which has, he argues, “along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche” (*Postmodernism* 16). These fictional stories reflect Jameson’s argument: *El asco* has no single principal character, being rather a conversation between two friends; it provides no comprehensive background for Moya or Vega, nor does it describe their physical appearance for the reader to imagine the characters. There are just fragments of the past for readers to come to know the characters, but no concrete image can be created; there is, rather, a sense of mystery or suspense attached to these characters. Likewise, the narrator of *Insensatez* is nameless and shadowy. Only *El hombre de Montserrat* features a well-structured protagonist. Even here, and however much Lieutenant Carlos García seems to be the book’s principal character, he definitely does not incarnate the “individual subject” or “the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 15). For he represents a dissident voice even among the powerful. It is through Lieutenant García’s story that we get a sense of how the social world is structured and we understand that space is also not unified; that not everybody is equally

powerful even within the establishment. People like Lieutenant García exist in the army too, who belong to one of the country's most powerful organizations but provide examples of powerlessness and marginalization. Therefore, this is not just the story of one García in the army but many Garcías. He is not the “individual subject” and his story is not unique; rather, such stories are part of Guatemala's current situation.

The other aspect associated with the “disappearance of individual subject” and “the increasing unavailability of the personal style” can be seen here with the death of the narrator and the demise of a generic style. Each of these three works of fiction features many narrative voices and a combination of genres (testimonial, thriller, autobiography). But the “unavailability of the personal style” at the same time contributes to the text's complexity, in that it makes a reader uneasy as he or she cannot identify with the style. This forces us to be active participants rather than passive observers. Limiting them only to the characteristics of *testimonio* as a reading style of the eighties and nineties—with a focus on truth and authenticity, facts versus fiction, literature versus *testimonio* and resistance and solidarity—will take away the nuances from these texts. At the same time, reading them only as fiction, thriller, or autobiography will make us overlook the presence of testimonial elements in them. Thus, they can be read in multiple ways; they defy categorization. They suggest that an insistence on such generic divisions in literary or cultural studies can sometimes rule out a potential creative medium (*testimonio* in this case), they make us question the ways in which these texts have been canonized according to rigid criteria, and ask us to further test the limits of our understanding of a work of art. For example, here, parody serves as a literary tool to read contemporary fiction as *testimonio*. I call it parody rather than pastiche for its double-voiced character: the way in which it poses challenges and raises

questions about the past. For these texts are not the simple imitation of an earlier style. They repeat that style with a certain intention and yet maintain their differences.

These texts establish a relationship with the past by alluding to earlier approaches that have been read as *testimonio*. They draw on the testimonial genre—they are factual, they depict torture and oppression, and they narrate the story from the perspective of the main character. Yet they include different narrative voices, they are “fictional” and display self-consciously literary elements; thus, fulfilling the role of parodying *testimonio* as a genre canonized in the 1980s. In other words, these narratives build their structure around the genre and also subvert it. *El asco*, *El hombre de Montserrat*, and *Insensatez* problematize the concept of *testimonio* as a genre, at the same time as they also bring it up to date for present needs. They describe the present situation of these countries: though the military regimes may have gone, assassinations and kidnappings still occur. They address the residue that remains after the civil wars, wars that unfortunately did little to change society for the better. Contemporary Central American fiction can be read as *testimonio* and in doing so we, the readers, revive the reading strategy of *testimonio* which was thought to be over. At the same time, we are also challenging the rigidity of the texts’ fictional aspect—in other words, they are not just fiction but *testimonios* as well. However, one of the criteria to interpret a fiction as a parody of the past literary form is that it can only be understood as parody if the reader recognizes it. As Hutcheon says, “while parody offers a much more limited and controlled version of this activation of the past by giving it a new and often ironic context, it makes similar demands upon the reader, but these demands are more on his or her knowledge and recollection than on his or her openness to play” (*A Theory of Parody* 5). Thus, the reader needs to have knowledge of the background text that has been parodied and decode the codes set by the author to interpret the contemporary text as a parody.

El asco, *Insensatez*, and *El hombre de Montserrat* can be decoded as parody only when we can set them against the earlier narratives that were defined as *testimonio* and observe the various changes, negotiations, and challenges that the contemporary texts posit to them. Thus, the present-day fiction emphasizes the need to know and acknowledge the past by adapting a former model—not nostalgically, but through critical reflection.

These contemporary fictional narratives are in dialogue with the past: they relate to and reflect on a past that also seems to be their source of information or point of interest. But that does not mean that they have “immortalized” the past form; through their dialogic structure they challenge and question the canonization of the genre. They reinvent the past form or the act of story-telling in a new way. As Hutcheon points out, quoting Burden on the “historical consciousness” of parody, it is this “that gives it the potential power both to bury the dead, so to speak, and also to give it new life” (*A Theory of Parody* 101). But beyond a knowledge of the past, these works of fiction also insist on the present condition of Central America. If anything, the social situation, as portrayed in present day texts, is worse now than ever—the danger, the violence, the fear of being killed without reason or cause. The market tends to manipulate human emotions, sell violence, and dictate choices to Central Americans. Contemporary narratives, such as *El asco*, *Insensatez*, and *El hombre de Montserrat*, deal with these issues while reminding their readers of a time when such violence was considered exceptional, and when people believed that together they could put an end to it and create a better Central American society. Thus, we see here the role of parody as a re-creation or construction of a new meaning whose base still holds elements from the past—a past as the only reference in these texts to compare the present, and a past that cannot be ignored in Central American literature as it keeps haunting the present. In the next chapter, I will explore how the consequences of the ways in which the past

interferes with the present. One such significant repercussion of that past (civil wars) is migration. We will examine stories of Central American immigrants who escape death threats in their countries and travel to the United States. I consider these tales as *testimonio* as they describe exploitation both at the hands of *coyotes* (people smugglers) while travelling to North, and at the hands of North American state agencies and private corporations. Apart from the struggle that the immigrants face, these narratives also recount the life of the migrants in their homeland and in the United States, again underlining the connection between the past and the present.

Chapter Three: Migrant Tales from Central America to the United States: A Testimonial

Approach to Fictional Texts

3.1 Introduction: Transnationalism and Testimonio

This chapter explores the contemporary Central American literature of transnational migration within the framework of *testimonio*. There were transnational elements in the classic *testimonios*, but they were generally ignored in critical writing about the genre. The narratives of classic testimonial texts often spanned two countries and involved the transmission of, and constant negotiation between, different languages. Moreover, the swift translation of such texts into English made them available as much (if not more) to an international audience than to the citizens of the countries in which they were mostly set. But this transnationalism had continually to be denied by most of the genre's readers and critics. Indeed, this was a constitutive tension in so much as the genre was defined in terms of its power to channel the authentic voice of a geographically-located subordinate culture. As Brett Levinson says of Rigoberta Menchú, informant of what has come to stand as the definitive *testimonio*, "even and especially as she pronounces her discourse in Paris, to an educated anthropologist, in a language (Spanish) that for the most part her community cannot read, via a most traditional Western medium, the book—Menchú *must* speak from the pure, non-Western site of her ancestors if she is to speak for her community at all" ("Neopatriarchy and After" 44). Yet this transnational aspect of classic *testimonio* can be seen not only in *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, which was narrated to Elizabeth Burgos-Debray in France, but also for instance in *Miguel Mármol*, narrated to Roque Dalton in Czechoslovakia, *Si me permiten hablar*, narrated by Domitila Barrios de Chungara partly in Mexico and partly in Bolivia, and *The Little School*, written by the Argentine Alicia Partnoy from exile in the USA.

The other key transnational element in narratives traditionally read as *testimonio* is the fact that their very *raison d'être* was to draw international attention to the genocide or the violent oppression carried out by Latin American governments, and then to community resistance struggle and solidarity led by the leftist parties against such dictatorships. Beasley-Murray notes that “the controversial aspect of *testimonio* as it affected the United States (particularly) was the way in which it became part of a project by leftist intellectuals to articulate solidarities within and from the academy” (“Thinking Solidarity”126). Elsewhere Beasley-Murray points out that *testimonio* “touches directly on the global and its real impact has always been outside any national or even Latin American context. *Testimonio* was read more by North American undergraduates than by Central American *campesinos*” (*Posthegemony* 268). Arguments such as these highlight the transnational elements of narratives read as *testimonio*. Yet, beyond these few critics, the general absence of considerations on transnationalism in discussion of *testimonio* raises uncomfortable questions that would eventually come to mark its apparent downfall. Was *testimonio* really (as David Stoll proposed) simply a vehicle by which to promote leftist Latin American ideology to unthinking (and/or romanticizing) Western audiences? Was the genre’s demise not also sealed by readers’ determination to read such texts as relatively straightforward (even, naïve) political documents rather than in terms of their literary and rhetorical strategies? Was it inevitable that such texts would be reduced to a series of topics or talking points, pitting marginalization and victimhood against solidarity and resistance? The lack of much if any discussion of the transnational aspect of the narratives read as *testimonio* seems to suggest that their role was predetermined. As Beasley-Murray puts it, in a discussion of Omar Cabezas’s *La montaña es algo más que una gran estepa verde*, “Though *testimonio* is presented as the *cri de coeur* of the oppressed, Cabezas shows how it becomes the means by which a committed

intelligentsia seeks to resolve its own sense of isolation and affliction” (266). Kimberly A. Nance also argues:

At one extreme, critical reticence has taken the form of a definitive insistence on silence, on the grounds that *testimonio* offers no textual object on which literary critics might legitimately speak. This stance may be reverential—treating testimonios as sacred texts beyond criticism—or merely practical, assuming them to be transparent texts consisting only of unelaborated surfaces and where nothing is in need of critical explication. It may even be dismissive, arguing that *testimonio* does not meet the standard of literature worthy of serious study. (*Can Literature Promote Justice?*¹⁰)

Thus, *testimonio* arguably became either a medium to help intellectuals overcome their “isolation and affliction” or “sacred texts” that could not (perhaps, should not) be read too critically.

In all this, other possible ways of reading *testimonio* were ignored as the genre was safely confined to the periphery, even by those who most lauded its accomplishments. In other words, *testimonio* continued to be identified as the “other” to the dominant modes of (reading) literature, which it purportedly challenged, and it escaped critical scrutiny as a result, leaving its defenders unprepared when critics questioned both its truth claims and its political affiliations. A different way of reading *testimonio* would focus on aspects such as transnationalism that make such texts both more complex and more ambiguous, moving the discussion so far restricted to utopian conceptions of solidarity to other areas. We might wonder about the impact that narration-in-exile about atrocities committed in a narrator’s home country has on *testimonio* as a genre. How, if at all, do transnational elements contribute to a text read as *testimonio*? I argue that reading a text as *testimonio* need not be limited only to notions of solidarity, struggle, or victimhood (though these are indeed important features of the genre), but it raises other issues that demand

equal attention. If we shift our focus from the aspects of *testimonio* that have already been discussed at such length, *testimonio* as a reading strategy may gain a new life. Thus, I propose to read contemporary Central American fiction as *testimonio*, focusing here on its transnational aspects. I argue that transnationalism was not only a characteristic of classic *testimonios*, but that it is very much present in contemporary texts too. Identifying such elements in *testimonio* and contemporary fiction alike shows a continuity with the past, providing a new context from which to read the region's cultural production today, even as we note the significant differences between then and now.

3.2 Testimonio and Contemporary Central American Fiction

Critics such as Beasley-Murray and Nance emphasize the need to *read* the text from the testimonial point of view with a focus on factors other than the ones already discussed. In other words, to read such stories independent of *testimonio* as a genre, but *testimonio* as a reading strategy. Such a shift from genre to mode of reading will provide us with the scope to explore aspects that the genre conceals. For if we put purported generic differences to one side, it is the similarities rather than the differences between classic *testimonios* and contemporary Central American fiction that become most apparent. Both, for instance, deal with two countries (the narrator generally speaks from a foreign land about his or her native place) and are often either written in, or translated into English immediately. However, contemporary narratives incorporate new elements: they do not close with the resistance struggle or with the description of violence, but they discuss the life of Central Americans post-civil war in a new country. Contemporary texts address the consequences of civil war—migration and new struggles—that those affected experience elsewhere.

Post-war narratives from the region describe the difficult and dangerous journey that Central Americans undertake to flee their countries and reach the United States. And once there, they often do not fit well within established categories: Arturo Arias cites Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla's observation that Central Americans "differ from many other immigrant groups ... in that they are neither strictly economic migrants nor accepted as refugees, but have the characteristics of both" (*Taking their Word* 203). Thus, these complex characteristics with which the immigrants set foot in the United States further establish these texts as *testimonio*, as on the one hand, they demonstrate the struggles faced by the immigrants, the challenges that a new place, new culture, and new language pose to them, and on the other hand, they reflect on the political and social situation that force them to leave their home countries. These fictions also depict the sometimes-hostile reception that North Americans accord these immigrants, the dangers involved in the kind of jobs to which they are assigned, and the poverty in which they live there.

Arias notes that Central Americans are at the margins "of those marginal hyphenated others (Cuban-Americans, Mexican Americans)" (*Taking their Word* 186). Comparing the condition of Central American immigrants with that of other Latin American immigrants in the United States, he argues that the Latin identity construction does not fit well the Central Americans or the Central American-Americans within the community. He is concerned about not just the invisibility of Central Americans in the United States (despite the presence of a significant population from the region), but also that of its literature that often goes unread and unnoticed.²⁸ Arias adds that Central Americans in the United States face marginalization as "they have been perceived by Americans as both "illegal," and "communist" and by themselves as of

²⁸ Arias mentions that in his professional life he was once asked informally by a professor "Is there really a Central American literature?" (*Taking their Word* 186).

less value than Mexicans” (211), whereas, Mexicans in the United States are the “preferred undesirables” (212). Central Americans, therefore, rank lower in the immigrants’ position and sometimes prefer to pass themselves off as Mexicans.²⁹

In what follows, I discuss diverse transnational aspects of Central American literature read as *testimonio*: migration, especially to the United States; language and translation.

Testimonio comprises of different languages: it is narrated in one language and translated into another and in many cases the native language of the narrator is different from the language in which she/he narrates. English is one of the principal languages into which a text regarded as *testimonio* is translated, which makes it approachable to readers globally rather than limiting it solely to Hispanic readers. Further, these narratives involve two countries—the protagonist’s native country and the one to which they migrate—besides offering an insight into the psychological and emotional condition of the immigrants. They provide a platform for a socioeconomic, political and cultural comparison between the home country and the new one. The books that I analyze are Mario Bencastro’s *Odyssey to the North* (1999), Hector Tobar’s *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998), and Francisco Goldman’s *The Long Night of White Chickens* (1992).³⁰

These works of fiction not only raise issues related to the obstacles that Central American migrants face in the United States, but also describe the social unrest in their native countries. Post-war literary texts often begin when the immigrants are already in the United States, and then remember their past to give the reader an idea of the context that has forced them to migrate to a

²⁹ Arias notes that “Central Americans fleeing to the United States had to cope not only with the trauma of dead relatives or razed villages, but also with the angst of having to pass as Mexicans” (*Taking their Word* 212).

³⁰ *The Long Night of White Chickens*, which is set partly in Guatemala and partly in Boston, was written before the signing of the peace agreement in Guatemala (in 1996). Yet the book does not depict combat between army and guerrilla. Is it because, as critics like Ortiz Wallner and Arias state, by the late eighties and early nineties (particularly after the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Government), El Salvador and Guatemala had already embarked upon their peace process? In any case, Goldman’s novel resonates more with the other post-war fictional works (*The Tattooed Soldier* and *Odyssey to the North*) than with classic testimonial narratives. The war is confined to the background of a text that focuses on its repercussions as though it were already in the past.

foreign land. However, most of the narration is in the third person, as they introduce the story of not just one but many undocumented migrants from different parts of Latin America. Each text has a central protagonist who serves as a medium to the immigrants' world, connects the various stories and helps in the progress of the narrative. These contemporary works can be read as *testimonio* since they not only examine migrants' life and struggle in the North but also exhibit the fundamental characteristics of *testimonio* as a genre—chaos, revolution, violence and danger.

As Arias states about *Odyssey to the North*:

the triple description connotes three different emotions that [its protagonist] Calixto feels: shock at the death of his companion, fear of the police because he is illegal, but also anger, a by-product of war trauma that still haunts his relations with authority. He fears the police not only because 'they would blame him for the death and he would end up in jail, if not deported for being undocumented' (2), like any other illegal immigrant to the United States, but also because he was unjustly persecuted in his homeland. (213)

These literary texts, if approached as *testimonio*, will help to revive the genre and also offer a continuity with the past. The texts focus on the repercussions of violence and civil war—new issues that have emerged—as well as a continuation of life despite political turmoil.

3.3 Migration

Migration is among the most important transnational elements; it is the journey across national borders that sets up the transnational context. In classic *testimonios*, it was usually exile, rather than migration per se, that set up this context: most of the narrators told their stories, usually describing the political situation of their country, from outside their native land, where they lived in exile, and thus the two locales ("home" and "exile") are intrinsically related, in that the one enables the other to be described and events there narrated. Yet testimonial informants

characteristically do not mention their life in the foreign country or the impact of leading life in exile; therefore, no comparison between the two countries is consciously articulated. In Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio*, for instance, the narrative effectively stops as soon as she leaves Guatemala. The very last chapter is entitled "Exile," but is very vague about her life in Mexico: "I left, I went to other places, got to know other people." Yet it is here that she begins to formulate what would become her *testimonio*: "I remember that they asked for my testimony about the situation in Guatemala and I was very moved" (242).

In contemporary fiction, by contrast, transnational movement and its aftermath often become the subject of the story, rather than its narrative end (or unspoken condition of possibility). Here, unlike the classic *testimonio*, most of these protagonists are not living in exile. Though they have fled owing to death threats in their home country, they are not the revolutionaries or activists seen in earlier texts. They are common people doing odd jobs to survive. The immigrants in the contemporary narratives give reasons for leaving their countries. They also mention that apart from the danger and/or death threats, they wanted to migrate to the United States to lead a better life and to explore whatever opportunities the country might offer. However, they are not allowed an easy entry into the United States and they are not always legal migrants. Many arrive without legal documents, unlike the revolutionaries in exile who usually entered legally and always aimed to go back to their countries. These illegal immigrants aim to stay in the United States and do not plan to return to their own land. Thus, *testimonio* as a mode of reading contemporary literature has diverse roles to play when compared to earlier texts where the reading was restricted to fewer aspects. The contemporary texts are more than just texts of revolution or resistance, and they have the leeway to be more critical about the repercussions of insurrection or civil war. They highlight the experience of migration and demonstrate that how

the migrants get to the United States and what they do there are as important as the fact of crossing the border itself.

Mario Bencastro's *Odyssey to the North*, for instance, depicts the experience of Central and Latin Americans migrating to the United States to escape danger or simply in search of economic security. Such people dream of leading a better life but find themselves struggling to survive in a foreign land. The text also captures the migrants' long and tedious journey from Central America to the United States, led by smugglers from El Salvador. It exposes the exploitation, oppression, and abuse that the immigrants have to experience at the hands of the agents who take them to the North: "The *coyotes* [people smugglers] abuse the women and rape them, they'll kill anyone for a few dollars, and they abandon women and children in the desert for no good reason. Many travelers have disappeared and never been heard from again ... the *coyotes* treat the people like animals. In Mexico, once you get past the capital, your life isn't worth anything" (29). These contemporary works of fiction, thus, have testimonial characteristics which indicate many of Central America's ongoing post-war problems, not least as they are no longer *simply* Central American problems.

Hector Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* centers on Antonio Bernal, a young Guatemalan who is forced to leave his country as the army—which has killed his wife and two-year-old son—is now after him, too. We read of Antonio's life once he has moved to Los Angeles, the difficulties and the hardship that endures there, as at the same time he reflects on Guatemala and his past life. Like *Odyssey to the North*, this work also focuses on the dream that motivates migration and its contrast to the reality that newcomers encounter in the North. However, unlike *Odyssey to the North*, this book does not deal with the process of reaching the United States;

rather, it centers on the difficulties that the protagonist faces once there, and his attempts to come to terms with and an unpleasant past, in the foreign land.

Finally, Francisco Goldman's *The Long Night of White Chickens* shows another face of Central American migration to the USA. This story is about Flor de Mayo, an orphan from Guatemala who travels to Massachusetts, to live with a family there. Flor is neither an illegal immigrant nor someone who has faced particular problems in finding a job and sustaining herself abroad. Flor comes to the United States to take care of Roger Graetz, who is the narrator for most of the novel, and helps his Guatemalan mother with the housework so that she can continue her studies. Ira, Roger's father, treats her as his daughter and sends her to school. His affection, and her dedication towards studies, make her a strong and free woman. She chooses to lead a financially independent life in the US. Flor had difficulties in getting used to the new culture, especially the language which was a barrier for a long time, but this narrative focuses more on her achievements and success than on her struggles. Further, she was only fourteen when she first arrived in the US, unlike the immigrants in the other novels who are mostly adults when they leave their countries either to find a job in the North to support their families back home, or to escape danger, violence, and chaos in their native country. The other difference between this text and first two is that Flor had been living in an orphanage in Guatemala as her parents were dead. This shows that she does not have immediate ties back to her country as is the case with other immigrants. She then returns to Guatemala and is murdered there. So, the book narrates the subsequent attempt to reconstruct her life experience through the perspectives of different people who knew her when she was alive.

The principal theme within migration addressed here is the immigrants' life in the United States. I have divided migration into two sub-themes: the arrival of immigrants to the United

States, and the reference to two countries in the narrative. I am also interested in these texts' construction of the urban experience, and the connections they establish between cities North and South. These contemporary works further mention the expectations and the preconceived notions about the US with which immigrants arrive, and the kind of work and life they actually end up with. Reading *testimonio* in post-war Central America goes beyond issues of resistance, struggle, solidarity, victimhood, or "the coming together of the oppressed and the engaged metropolitan scholar that ... gives birth to the testimonial narrative" (Nance 6). It can also be about the struggle to survive in a foreign land, about finding opportunities to succeed and lead a socially and financially stable life.

3.3.1 Arrival in the US and Life Thereafter

Contemporary texts feature many characters, each with their own reasons for heading North and their own tales of the obstacles that they confront on their way. Often every chapter appears to be a fragment of a larger story that it is our task to piece together. Like the classic *testimonio*, these post-war stories evidence the presence of a collective voice even when they are told from the perspective of a central character. For example, *Odyssey to the North* focuses on Calixto, a Salvadoran mason, whose trajectory it traces from beginning to end. Calixto had to leave his country since the authorities were after his life. Yet he asserts that he is not "even involved in political things. Who knows who the hell fingered me? And now I don't know what to do. I need to work to support my wife and three children, but I can't do anything if I have to be on the run" (19). In El Salvador, Calixto used to work on construction sites. He moved to the city from his village in search of a better life, after the village had been destroyed in the war between the army and the rebel forces (12). Later, he had to leave his country due to death threats, but above all he is concerned with the search for work, so he can save money to send back home. He says: "My

only desire was to find a job, get some money together and send it to my family, so they could pay someone to bring them here” (16). In the US, he finds other Latin Americans who are in a similar situation. Thus, we can read the narrative of Calixto, who escaped El Salvador due to threats and reached Washington in search of a job to support his family, as *testimonio*, as the tale of an exemplary subject from whom we can generalize about the general fate of others like him. Similarly, the other novels seek to trace the outlines of a common predicament through immersion in the particular: in *The Tattooed Soldier*, it is Antonio’s life (past and present) and his revenge plot that is the thread connecting the various events in the novel; in *The Long Night of White Chickens* is the story of Flor de Mayo who was mysteriously killed in Guatemala and the narrator’s attempt to discover the murderer that provides the text with its narrative continuity.

These stories further depict the odd jobs that illegal immigrants do simply to survive once they reach the United States. Antonio, for instance, works as a bus boy, a dishwasher, and even “cut lawns and planted flowers for strangers” (50) in *The Tattooed Soldier*. In *Odyssey to the North*, Calixto initially works as a painter assigned to paint buildings, later finding work in hotel kitchens as a dishwasher. Apart from working such petty jobs, they are also exploited, tortured and victimized, first by the people smugglers or *coyotes* who bring them to the North illegally, then by employers who, taking advantage of their illegal status, not only pay them less but also deprive them of other benefits to which they are entitled. In *The Tattooed Soldier*, for instance, José Juan tells his friend Antonio “Maybe I should go bother that Armenian guy again. If that guy paid me my money then we wouldn’t have to stay here” (49). Thus, we see that it is not just that they don’t have jobs but also likely that they have worked previously and not been paid their salary. The workers are mostly illegal and therefore do not have rights to fight for the dues that were not paid. These aspects of exploitation, torture, and victimhood also link contemporary

narratives to the *testimonio* as a genre of the eighties and nineties, being problems common to both immigrant characters and the voices in classic *testimonios*. Classic *testimonio* informed its readers how owners of coffee plantations and mines exploited the indigenous people in Central America. This makes us ponder whether such problems have ended today. While the situation or the location may have changed, and some new issues have emerged in today's texts in the post-civil war era, elements such as exploitation, torture, and victimhood at the hands of powerful people continue to exist. Can we really then say that "the moment of *testimonio* is over"?³¹

Another aspect of the texts in question dealing with migration is that these narratives have no beginning or end, as they present a struggle that is ongoing, and the text is just a fragment of a much larger story. In *Odyssey to the North*, for instance, the narrative opens in the middle of things: "It's going to be beautiful day here in Washington!" exclaimed the voice on the radio" (1). It ends with a description of how Calixto and his companions are released by American authorities and are on their way to venture into the new city life. *The Tattooed Soldier* starts with an encounter between Antonio and his landlord, a Mr. Hwang, who orders Antonio to vacate his apartment as soon as possible as he is unable to pay the rent. He does not have any place to go and will be homeless soon. And he thinks, "Voy a ser uno de los 'homeless.' It did not seem right to him that a man who loved to read, a man with *Crimen y Castigo* and *El Idiota* and countless other works of real literature scattered on the floor of his apartment, would be called this ugly word" (5). Antonio and his friend José Juan start living as homeless people in "a flat, empty space where even the squat buildings had disappeared ... there were several shelters and tents ... the shelters were spread across several vacant lots" (12). In this case, though, despite the open beginning, there seems to be some finality to the story, as it takes us to the

³¹ Beverley, *Testimonio* 77.

conclusion of a revenge plot by which Antonio kills the man who had murdered his wife and child. Yet we have learned, from this text and others, that violence never truly puts an end to anything; it merely opens a new cycle of struggle and displacement.

The other important post-civil war problem reflected in these works is the invisibility of Central American immigrants in the United States. They are often misidentified as Mexicans or Cubans, and sometimes they themselves prefer to conceal their real identity. In *The Long Night of White Chickens* the narrator's mother, Mirabel Graetz, prefers to pass as Puerto Rican or Cuban:

For so many years my mother considered it one of the great offences of life in the United States that even the plumber might assume she was Puerto Rican or, even more grating to my mother, Cuban, and so think that he could treat her as a social equal or even inferior. But now she often acts as if she prefers even that to being identified as a Guatemalan by even the most perfunctory of newspaper readers, who usually associate her country's name now only with such things as death squads, torture, disappearances, the most horrific and wide-spread massacres. (11)

Similar instances can be noted in *The Tattooed Soldier*. When Antonio has to leave his apartment, and starts living on the streets, we are told that he is "carrying everything in a plastic bag, and no one would look him in the eye. He was used to being unseen. There was the invisibility of being a bus boy, of walking between the tables unnoticed, a shadow rolling the cart, clearing the dishes. But this was another kind of invisibility. People now made a point of turning away from him" (10). Arias, too, comments that Central American immigrants "have been nearly invisible within the imaginary confines of what constitutes the multicultural landscape of the United States. When Latinos are mentioned in this country, most average

Californians still think primarily of Chicanos, and people in other regions might think of Caribbean-Americans” (185). For these immigrants, the struggle does not end once they reach the North but continues thereafter. The tales told in these novels show us that their suffering will not go away with the end of the war; if anything, newer hardships arise as a consequence of it.

3.3.2 Inclusion of Two Nations

These post-war fictions, like the classic *testimonio*, involve two different nations. However, unlike the classic *testimonio*, they compare life in these countries and describe elements like hope, delusion, or the different kinds of struggle that migrants face or have faced in their native as well as the foreign land (mostly the United States). Their story typically begins in the foreign country, depicting their present situation, and then goes back to their past life in their native countries. The description of this past life (however invisible to others around them) is important as it relates the reasons for their migration. It recounts the political and economic situation that compelled them to leave home, their dreams of leading a stable life in the United States, as well as the traumatic past that continues to haunt them in the present. However, the difference between the narration in the classic compared to the contemporary texts read as *testimonio* is that the latter exhibit more temporal mobility, shifting between the past, immediate present, and a still uncertain future; the reader can thus compare their life as lived in different nations. In classic *testimonio*, by contrast, the immediate present of exile is eclipsed by layered presentations of various pasts, while the future is often unaddressed.

For instance, *The Tattooed Soldier* addresses the past life of Antonio, his wife, Elena, and her impression of Antonio. However, unlike testimonial reading of the eighties and nineties where the narrator chronicles her or his own past, here the reader is introduced to Antonio’s past through another’s eyes, Elena’s. Elena is a carefree, strong-willed woman: “she’d always done

things her own way ... her father had always told her to avoid political movements, so she brought home revolutionary leaflets and left them scattered around the house in the most conspicuous places” (84). The first impression she has of Antonio is that “there was a gentleness to him; he seemed untouched by the harshness and arrogance that had contaminated the rest of the male species on campus. He was bookish but not without charm” (85). Elena notices that Antonio is different from the men that she had known so far: “all of her boyfriends had been revolutionaries, organizers of boisterous protests, makers of eloquent speeches” (85). But revolutionary ideas do not do much to alter the male ego; such brave men often got distracted “whenever there was pretty woman around” (87). She thinks that “the change was only superficial ... all the leadership positions ... were still held by men. This Leninism, or whatever they call it, is just the same machismo ... machismo with a more serious face” (87). Antonio is different. He is not directly involved in student political protests or speechifying; rather, he is involved with the university’s literary journal, *Provocaciones*. In conversation with Elena, he never seems to be offended if Elena disagrees with him (89). Tobar’s novel both describes the life of an immigrant in Los Angeles and takes the reader back to Central America and its political situation. Thus, Elena’s viewpoint makes us aware of Guatemala’s revolution and revolutionaries at the same time as it informs us about the character of Antonio. Her insight gives us a better understanding of Antonio *and* his context.

Apart from providing readers with their protagonists’ backgrounds, these books also describe their lives both in the United States and in Central America, thereby including at least two nations in the narrative. These texts convey the expectations about the United States that the immigrants bring with them, hopes that are soon dashed when they realize that most opportunities are not available to them. Antonio comes to the United States with dreams of

studying literature at UCLA but cannot go beyond night-school English classes. Calixto, in *Odyssey to the North*, says that “the first months were very difficult for me, and I wasn’t expecting that, because I arrived with my head full of a whole bunch of fantasies” (15). Another immigrant in the same text says: “the same thing happened to me. In Colombia I had been told the story that here everyone made a lot of money and that it was really easy to buy expensive things, like cars, and enjoy life in company of blonde, beautiful women” (16).

In *The Tattooed Soldier*, when still in his home country, Antonio imagines Los Angeles as “a place of vibrant promises, with suntanned women in bikinis and men carrying ice chests brimming with beer. It was a city of handsome, fit young people, all with a bounce in their step” (41). Arriving in the United States, “Antonio thought of it as the place where he would redeem himself, undertake a new beginning. He remembered the feeling of tempered hope when he arrived at the airport and everything was so new and orderly compared to home” (51). Antonio travels to Los Angeles because of the death threat that he had received in his country, but his Mexican friend José Juan travels to the United States “to be a better provider for his family, so his children could have the pretty things they deserved” (49). One of his conclusions is that “when you come to the United States you moved down in social station and professional responsibilities. Women with medical degrees became laboratory assistants, accountants became ditch diggers. Los Angeles made you less than you were back home” (51). Still, people accept all this since they can make “six times more money than they could in El Salvador or Mexico, even though everything was twice as expensive” (52). So, these works of fiction demonstrate the complexity of the process of migration. They show that it is not a mere transfer from one place to another but that people who migrate from different countries to the United States are diverse. Every migrant story is distinct and raises specific concerns related to his or her own story.

The texts also examine the survival strategies that immigrants have to learn once they reach the United States. Some look for jobs so that they can send money back to their family in their homeland; others plan to adapt to North American culture and intend to settle permanently. In *Odyssey to the North*, Calixto casually calls his coworker in the restaurant where both are dishwashers “Juancho.” The latter replies:

My name isn’t Juancho anymore; now I’m Johnnie.

(*Calixto, surprised.*) Yoni! What kind of name is that?

No, it’s not Yoni; it’s pronounced Johnnie.

I don’t understand! Your name is Juancho Molinos. Knock it off!

It *was*; now it’s Johnnie Mills! (137)

Juancho makes a conscious attempt to incorporate changes to his existing identity, even down to changing his name; he is trying to make a new start in the United States with a new identity. As he says: “I am not like all those people who live here but keep thinking they’re back there. This is something else! People have to get with the times.” On the other hand, Calixto continues to carry the image of El Salvador and his people in his mind: “I’m not going to forget my town either. How could I ever choose white bread over tortillas? Hamburgers over *pupusas*? Hot dogs over *tamales*? Never! There’s no comparison!” (137). Calixto is nostalgic and struggles to understand or feel settled in the North. He continues to hark back to El Salvador: “My country is a difficult memory, because on the one hand it’s the memory of hunger and misery, but on the other it’s the beautiful memory of my people and my customs” (65). Apart from the narrative drive and plot that bring the two nations together, the characters themselves keep their homeland alive, continuously comparing it to the country they are currently living in. Yet what these contemporary Central American texts demonstrate is the heterogeneity of such stories—while

some migrants try to become a part of the North by changing their names and adapting to the new culture, others struggle to situate themselves emotionally *between* the two nations. They cannot let go of their homeland; they continue to reflect on the condition of their native country, and at the same time try to negotiate their identity in their new environment.

These texts depict the sometimes miserable conditions in which illegal immigrants live in the US. They live in packed apartments or sleep in parks. *Odyssey to the North* describes homeless Latin Americans in terms of a parody of more formal transnational organizations: “those nocturnal inhabitants represented something like the ‘United Nations of Misfortune,’ headquartered in the park” (51). Calixto shares his experience of living in a packed apartment with his coworkers when he first arrives in Washington as:

Housing is a real problem here. When I arrived in Washington, the first few months I stayed in an apartment where there were already a lot of people living.

(A Chilean cook’s helper enters; his nickname is Chele Chile.) How many people were living there?

Twenty.

(Cali, a Colombian waiter, enters.) In how many rooms?

Just one bedroom.

Twenty, in a one bedroom apartment? (14)

Throughout, the struggle to survive, which was the primary concern in the life of the immigrants back in their countries during the civil wars, continues in the new and developed nation as well. However, these contemporary narratives emphasize new issues which have emerged as a result of the violence back home. For example, *The Long Night of White Chickens* depicts the often illicit business that began flourishing around the orphans created by the war. These orphans were

either sold to childless couples in Europe and the US, or their organs taken out for sale. Indeed, orphans were even manufactured in that “many of them [were] not even orphans but illegally purchased and even stolen babies, and ... they were being kept there until their illegal adoptions could be arranged ... a business angle to civil war and violent repression” (4). A large part of this novel deals with how Flor, the principal character, manages her orphanage, the kinds of parents she chooses for adoption, and her vision for the orphans. As the orphanage’s director, Flor expects the initiative to adopt orphans to come more from people within the country. She thinks that in this way Guatemalans can manifest solidarity against the violence perpetrated in the country. Yet she is suspected of organizing an illegal adoption racket for profit and the police believe this to be the reason behind her killing. Soon she is at the center of a national scandal: “the newspapers ran photographs of a house full of crowded cribs. And close-up shots of the frightened face of a captured *niñera*, or nursemaid, who was quoted as saying that her employer, or rather one of her employers but the only one who ever came to the safe house in person, was Flor de Mayo” (4). The novel’s narrator and protagonist, Roger, goes to Guatemala, claiming to be her brother, to find the truth and track down Flor’s killer. Chaos, violence, and danger, elements that were associated with classic *testimonios*, can still be found in contemporary novels from the region (and sometimes from outside the region as well). But the nature of the struggle has changed—the fight against an oppressive government has faded, as the violence of global market imperatives comes to the fore—with the emergence of new problems.

Contemporary Central American migrant stories, when read in testimonial terms, challenge the canonization of *testimonio* as a genre that got its momentum during the eighties and nineties and at the same time manifest a continuity with such narratives. These stories highlight characteristics of the classic *testimonios* that were ignored in previous readings. Classic

testimonios were in fact narrated at a distance from their narrators' homelands, and yet the transnational aspects of such texts were not discussed, thus limiting the complexity the text offers to its readers. Contemporary fiction when read as *testimonio* not only highlights issues that emerged as a consequence of the civil wars, such as the challenges immigrants confront in a foreign land, but also questions key features that defined *testimonio* as a genre, such as the dichotomy between fact and fiction, truth and lies, authenticity and subterfuge.

3.4 Narrative Strategy

These works of fiction can be read as *testimonio*, but this is not to say that there are not differences between these stories and those told by classic *testimonios*, specifically in the way they are narrated. One of the principal defining factors of classic *testimonios* in the 1990s and earlier was that they were narrated in the first person by an informant whose story was then synecdochally generalized to an entire (national) community.³² The narrative strategies of contemporary fiction tend to be more diverse and transnational. These stories have central characters whose trajectories thread through an entire book, yet they are not necessarily the text's narrators. The different narrative voices provide a range of perspectives, as these novels depict and respect the diversity of the issues that immigrants face in a new country, beyond tracing the journey from Central America to the United States. For example, *Odyssey to the North* addresses migrants' urgent need to tell their tales of struggle, injustice, and victimhood as they travel north. When they tell their stories, there is a sense of solidarity among them:

The detainees quietly related to each other their personal stories, testimonies that spoke of fragmented families and abandoned homes, of journeys, filled with of trials and

³² There are classic texts that show diverse narrative voices and are also considered to be *testimonio* like *La noche de Tlatelolco*, *No me agarran viva*, or *Operación masacre*. Again, however, less critical attention was paid to the manner in which a story is told to its reader.

tribulations that few managed to complete and finally enter the longed-for paradise of the North. The whispering of the prisoners and their stories often ended at two o'clock in the morning. It seemed that each and every one of them felt the urgent need to tell something. Silence was their worst enemy; it ate them up inside and caused them to despair. Therefore, solidarity and understanding were their highest expressions of friendship. Everyone needed someone to talk to. (183)

The contemporary narratives that I discuss in this chapter (except *The Long Night of White Chickens*) open with a third-person narrative voice that introduces the characters of the text and takes the story forward. But they also feature other narrative forms, such as newspaper articles and letters. In *Odyssey to the North*, the *Arizona Daily Star* of July 7, 1980, for instance, is quoted stating that “The bodies of 10 more Salvadorans were found south of here yesterday, bringing to 13 the number of known dead from a group of at least 26 refugees abandoned by a smuggler in the scorching desert” (90). The text presents a montage of different sources and styles of information. Such examples give the impression of factual evidence contained in these works of fiction. *Odyssey to the North* further cites a deportation case, wherein a group of illegal immigrants end up getting arrested by the police and are sent back to their native countries, giving an insight into the deportation process. This story is that of Teresa, an immigrant who fights (and loses) a case against her deportation despite her claims that her life is in danger back in her country. We are then provided with an article from a Salvadoran newspaper, *La Tribuna*, reporting that a woman found dead in El Salvador has been identified as Teresa, previously deported from the United States. Hence, the fiction connects an extra-textual reality by providing factual evidence. The varied narrative strategies, which include evidence like these newspaper

articles, leads us to read these texts as *testimonio* as they introduce “truthful,” “authentic,” and “factual” events, albeit by other formal methods than reliance on a single informant.

Another narrative mode in *Odyssey to the North* is found in the dialogues between different characters, and letters exchanged between guerrilla fighters. The letters appear towards the end of the narrative and seem to be exchanged between two lovers, one of whom (the girl) has illegally migrated to the United States. We thus observe it is not only the common people who travel north to escape the war, but also people who are fighting the war—guerrillas and military alike. Meanwhile, the dialogues, too, emphasize the transnational aspect of *testimonio* as there are many countries of origin for the voices present in these texts—Colombian, Cuban, Chilean, and so on—that collectively address life and struggle in the United States. However, like many classic *testimonios* (for example, *La noche de Tlatelolco* and *Si me permiten hablar*) this text does not have a plot. Thus, we observe that the distinct narrative strategies (on one hand, the inclusion of newspaper articles that emphasize on the factual events in the fiction, and on the other, the dialogues between characters from different nations) demonstrate not only a connection between fact and fiction, but also highlights the text’s transnational elements.

The Tattooed Soldier, too, is mostly narrated in the third person, with dialogues between the characters and letters to Antonio from his mother in Guatemala. It features conversations between people from different parts of the world who have ended up in the United States, conversations between Antonio and his Mexican friend José Juan, and Frank and Mayor, two homeless blacks with whom Antonio and José Juan share space. Unlike classic *testimonio*, *The Tattooed Soldier* focuses on the lives of two characters—Antonio and Guillermo Longoria—who lived in Guatemala and migrated to the US. The narrative style maintains the transnational aspect not just by documenting the lives of immigrants from different parts of the world, but also by

creating a story that moves back and forth between the two nations.³³ The text begins with Antonio's financial situation in Los Angeles and at the same time, Guillermo's life in the same city. The story takes a turn when Antonio recognizes Guillermo, an ex-Guatemalan army man, as the person who had killed his wife and son in Guatemala. "Antonio saw one more thing before the bus jerked into gear and began to roll forward. On the killer's left arm, the one not holding the ice cream, halfway between the wrist and the elbow, there was a mark on the skin, yellow and black. A tattoo of a yellow animal with its jaws open" (19). As in classic *testimonio*, this narrative starts with the protagonist's story and then relates it to the story of others; reading a text as *testimonio* is never about one person but about a community or a definite society. Here, too, the tale starts with the story of Antonio, after which we are introduced to characters like José Juan and other homeless immigrants who have all come to the US either to escape death threats in their native land or armed with a dream to improve their economic condition and support their family back home. All this brings into focus the transnational element of reading it as *testimonio*.

The narrative in *The Tattooed Soldier* then moves back to the past in Guatemala before the death of Antonio's family and shows us how Elena and Antonio met—how they fell in love and decided to marry amid the political violence, the killings, and ongoing social disturbance. Though the text is narrated mostly in the third person, at various points individual characters present the story from their own perspectives.³⁴ For instance, we learn about the dangers of Guatemalan society through Elena: "Anyone could be picked up, at any time, from any place"

³³ This trend is present in classic *testimonio*, too, in texts such as *Canción de Rachel*, where the protagonist talks about her travel to Europe, or *Miguel Mármol*, which likewise talks about its subject's travel to Europe and Russia (as well as a number of Latin American countries). Hence, the understanding of the genre as a story narrated by a narrator speaking on behalf of an entire community of a particular class, race, or nationality is challenged by these texts and also by the contemporary ones as they emphasize that the narrative strategy has contributed to reading *testimonio* from a transnational perspective.

³⁴ Again, we see here that the narrative is not just about Antonio and Longoria's life in Guatemala, their migrant friends and their survival strategies. It is also about Elena and Guatemala. Therefore, not only does it have multiple perspectives but also different layers that are narrated at different time periods with distinct focus and space.

(100). She also notices the death squad which is described as “two white Jeeps without license plates parked to the right of the palace, each with tinted windows, a death-squad signature” (95). The danger is depicted further in the text with the note that: “Mostly the brigade operated during the day and took people out of their homes. ‘In broad daylight’, as the expression went. They stopped cars on the open highway and dragged drivers from behind the wheel. Sometimes the victims resisted, sometimes they didn’t” (137).

We also read about events from the perspective of Guillermo Longoria, whose account radically changes our perception of what is meant by danger: “Abduction was not easy work. The inevitable public screaming began to grate on him Longoria was tired of mothers pulling at his shirt, sick of wrestling with wives who just wouldn’t let their husbands go” (139). The text invokes the psychological impact of the experience on death squad members, which they have to live with for the rest of their life: “To live forever with the voices of boys and girls, their last words, the calling out to their mothers. That was the biggest sacrifice. All of them cried before you silenced them for good, and a lot of them shit and pissed. Even now, the smell reminded him of death. It took a lot out of a soldier to see this and hear this and live with it. You were never the same again” (65). We get to know how Guillermo was forced to join the army as a young boy under eighteen, and his experience in the army, where the only way to survive was by being cruel oneself: “the army was a cruel place; it was not for weak hearted people. But the army made you a man ... they might as well bury you, if you didn’t believe in what you were doing you’d go crazy, you’d spin out of control. Longoria had seen this happen to men, to good soldiers, the blood and life disappearing from them like water going down a drain. It was because they didn’t believe” (63). Hence, the text can also be read as the *testimonio* of a soldier, a “retired sergeant in the Jaguar Battalion of the Guatemalan army, lived six blocks from

MacArthur Park in a brick building called the Westlake Arms” (20). He worked in Pulgarcito Express, in Los Angeles, and made enough money from “his job ... to afford living alone” (21).

Comparing both *testimonios*—of Antonio and Guillermo—we notice that on the one hand, Antonio has moved from his apartment to the streets, he became homeless and jobless. On the other hand, “a soldier did not lose things when he quit the army; he carried them with him wherever he went” (21). Antonio and Guillermo are both living in Los Angeles, but their distinct pasts generate distinct emotions and opinions about them. Also, since the past has been narrated from different points of view, we develop a more varied perception of the social conditions in Guatemala unlike the classic *testimonio*, where the focus lay on a single narrator. In the third part of the book, we are taken back to Los Angeles where we learn about the 1992 riots and the prevailing chaos in the United States.

The Long Night of White Chickens features a different narrative strategy. Here, for the most part, the narrator is Roger, for whom Flor de Mayo is like a surrogate older sister. Flor dies mysteriously in Guatemala while working as a director at an orphanage: “She was discovered by some of her orphans lying on her bed in her room at the orphanage just before six in the morning, wearing pajamas, and dead from a single deep knife gash in her throat” (4). The book can be read as a *testimonio* of Flor de Mayo, whose image, character, and personality are posthumously reconstructed through the eyes of different people who have known her, much like the classic *testimonio No me agarran viva*. The other characteristic relating to the classic *testimonio*, is the sense of urgency or the need to tell the tale. As the narrator states “There’s Flor, the living Flor, my main assignment, to tell her as I always have, as if none of this had happened. This, Moya [a boyfriend] likes to exhort me, is not going to be a chronicle of what it’s like to be dead” (107). The text also gives realistic details (like classic *testimonios*, where authenticity and referentiality

were key factors) about Flor: for instance, when she returned back to Guatemala, why she returned, and what the country was like then. It plays with factual events in a fictional text, weaving historical details through a personal narrative by drawing again on a variety of sources:

In 1979 Flor ended up back in Guatemala City, where she was eventually hired to be director of a private orphanage and malnutrition clinic called Los Quetzalitos. On the seventeenth of February, 1983, towards the end of General Ríos Montt's highly successful counterinsurgency campaign, which according to what I've read in the papers and elsewhere added tens of thousands of new orphans to Guatemala's already huge orphan population, Flor was found murdered. (4)

However, in contrast to classic *testimonios* that generally start with a character's past, here the narrative starts in the present and then moves forward and backward. Though we are not provided with the background of Flor's past early in the text, as the plot advances her voice is resurrected, for instance as Roger comes across letters she had written him from Guatemala after visiting her village for the first time: "Well, I went to Chiquimula. I almost said *home* to Chiquimula, but that would be a sentimental exaggeration, wouldn't it be?" (155). We are told about Flor's father and how, after his death, his girlfriend took Flor to the orphanage; from then on, Flor never knew her family till she found a job in Guatemala and returned home. Thus, the incorporation of letters, and names of historical figures (like Ríos Montt) address "factual" and "real" evidence (such as the reference to the specific years) in a fictional narrative about Flor de Mayo. This textual ambivalence is one of the many features that emphasize literariness within the testimonial reading or vice versa.

Then there is the transnational aspect of the narration in the figure of narrator himself: a Guatemalan-American who lives in the US but travels between Massachusetts and Guatemala

and writes about a protagonist who is herself brought up partly in the US and partly in Guatemala. For Guillermo B. Irizarry, this is in part a reflection of Goldman's own biography: "En *Long Night*, Goldman inscribe su propia condición de escritor transnacional en la situación errante de la voz narrativa y la de sus personajes, y registra, como señala Michael Templeton, 'the molecular conditions that underlie transnationalism and transmigrant experiences' y 'the rhizomic nature of transnationalism'" ("Subjetividades precarias" 11). The text's narrative style traces this transnationalism as it travels between North and South to unfold Flor's story. Like the other two literary texts, here, too, we find dialogues between different protagonists; yet the narrator in this case is not someone outside the story but an important part of it. Again, focusing on the narrative style as it reveals the text's complexity. Beasley-Murray states: "Committed intellectuals corrupt the genre's potential for difference and diversity, by single-mindedly channeling subaltern affect onto projects for national unity" (*Posthegemony* 267). Read more closely, we have seen how contemporary fiction contains testimonial elements, and how transnationalism figures in a text read as *testimonio* through the varied narrative style which adds diversity and complexity.

A dialogic narrative style brings out how migrants from different parts of the world survive in the same city without understanding each other. This is particularly the case in *The Tattooed Soldier*, which opens with a conversation between Antonio and his Korean landlord who is evicting him. Though the general import of the exchange is clear, when it comes to the details neither understands the other fully:

"What?" Antonio said.

"I ask what you say?" replied Mr. Hwang, a squat man in khaki pants and a freshly starched shirt.

“I said, how much time? More time. Time, Hwang?”

“What time? Say again.”

“Say what again? Time?”

“No.”

“I don’t understand.” (3-4)

So not all dialogues are successful: speakers are not always able to formulate their thoughts adequately and communication breaks down as the particulars are lost even if overarching generalities are conveyed. These are ambivalent, failed dialogues. Classic *testimonios* were also usually structured as a dialogue or underpinned by an implicit dialogue between informant and editor (ethnographer, journalist, activist), even if the editor subsequently wrote him or herself out of the narrative. For the dialogic aspect was never the focus of discussion (except perhaps in brief, self-exculpatory prologues), as classic *testimonios* sought to frame a first-person narrative whose story would resonate with a bounded community. Yet the underlying dialogic structure in fact breached those boundaries as it was frequently transnational in that the narrator and the ethnographer belonged to different countries and contexts. For instance, in Rigoberta Menchú’s text, the ethnographer, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, was Venezuelan and Menchú, an indigenous Guatemalan; *No me agarran viva* was the *testimonio* of a Salvadoran revolutionary, edited by Claribel Alegría, a Nicaraguan; *La noche de Tlatelolco* is a text about the massacre of students protesting in Mexico’s Plaza de las tres Culturas, which was edited by Elena Poniatowska, a French-born Mexican; and *Si me permiten hablar* was edited by Moema Viezzer, a Brazilian, while the narrator Domitila Barrios de Chungara was from Bolivia. Can we not find ambivalent, failed (or only partially successful) dialogues in these texts read as *testimonio*? Particularly, if we take into consideration the Rigoberta Menchú controversy? We must recall that Menchú was not

narrating her story in her native language but in a language that she was still learning; these texts were almost immediately afterward also translated into a third language, English. With such linguistic complexity, are the speaker's thoughts adequately formulated and is the listener able to hear them—or even hear that he or she is not hearing them?

Dialogue is important not only in determining the transnational characteristics of today's fictions that we are reading as *testimonio*, but also in the way it raises questions about *testimonio* as a whole owing to the varied narrative styles, languages, and translation involved. Emphasizing this aspect forces us to return to classic *testimonios* (as well as contemporary texts), as it brings multiple perspectives into focus and depicts a more holistic view of the life of migrants (or life in exile) in the present and past narratives read as *testimonio*.

3.5 Language and Translation

Language has played an important role in texts considered as *testimonio* ever since the genre came into existence. For example, the tale told in *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* was initially narrated in Spanish by Menchú to Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, even though Spanish was not Menchú's native language. Burgos-Debray notes in the book's introduction that Menchú “aprendió español hace solamente tres años, de ahí que su frase parezca incorrecta; sobre todo en lo que concierne al empleo de los tiempos verbales, y al de las preposiciones” (27). Thus, classic *testimonios* have always had multiple linguistic layers as the narrator processes her or his thoughts in one language and articulates them in another, while, often, there is also a third language—English—implicitly or explicitly in play, which makes the text available to readers globally. These languages also obey a hierarchy: Quiché, Menchú's native language, is among the least powerful; in the US, Spanish, too, has a lower status, although in Latin America it

dominates indigenous languages such as those of the Mayan people. Globally, English is perhaps the most powerful language particularly in the context of the United States.

Similar complexity is also visible in contemporary Central American fiction such as *The Tattooed Soldier*, as Julie Avril Minich notes: “Antonio, who speaks the dominant language in Guatemala, finds that his perception of his own identity changes when he arrives in Los Angeles, where he speaks a dominated language” (“Mestizaje as National Prosthesis” 218). At the same time, Minich points out how Antonio—while acknowledging the Quiché language—regards “Mayan culture as ‘ancient,’ part of their past” (217), something that is important to know to understand the past but that does not hold any value in their present. On the other hand, for Guillermo, it is a language that he learnt from his mother and “is *not* an ancient language of the past” (Minich 217). However, when Antonio travels to the North his dominant position as a Spanish speaker is transformed as his tongue becomes the dominated one in the new environment. People in this new nation “saw the Mayan and Aztec in their eyes or heard the Spanish handicap in their speech and took them for defenseless bumpkins” (50).

Language makes a person powerful or powerless in different situations; it changes one’s identity. As Antonio reflects: “In Spanish, I sound like the intelligent person I really am. In English, I am a bus boy” (4). *Odyssey to the North* describes a similar transformation when the migrants enter Mexico, even though the language in Central America and Mexico is the same (Spanish): “there are some Salvadoran words you should never say. For example, don’t say *pisto* when you’re talking about money” (47). The coyotes also tell them to think like Mexicans and “to talk with that accent, that sing-song voice Mexicans speak with” (47). In *Long Night*, language can be a means of connecting people, but also linguistic difference is a sign of disparate experiences that has to be overcome, as in the case of the narrator Roger and his father. On

Roger's return—after spending three years in Guatemala—to the US, where his father lives, he comments: “Me, tubercular, browned by three years of tropical sun and then yellowed by illness, speaking no English, but still—his son” (3).

While English makes Antonio powerless and a “bus boy,” in *Odyssey to the North* Juancho changes his Spanish name to the English “Johnnie,” in a bid to acquire some power or prestige. Through language, characters transform themselves in their new contexts; sometimes, this transformation makes them more powerful, and at other times, powerless. For Antonio, Spanish in his homeland gave meaning to his life, made him an important person, a husband, a father. It was also the reason why the dynamic Elena fell in love with him—precisely because of his ideas and thoughts that were distinct from those of her earlier lovers, but in Los Angeles these “ideas and learning that made him strong in Guatemala had slipped away once he crossed the border, lost in the translation” (4). It seems that he could not bring across the border any of the pride, strength, and other characteristics that held him high; his thoughts and ideas translated into English look weak, shameful, and hopeless. Likewise, in *Long Night*, Flor, an American citizen who has gone to school in the US, is also assessed on the basis of her accent and probably this is why even if she is an American citizen, she cannot become an “American.” One criterion for determining identity can be the status of the language one speaks. Though the immigrant community is diverse, as they come from different countries and different languages, this heterogeneous group is often considered to be a unified community, ignoring the differences in that they all contrast with the monolingual national norm. As Minich states: “The imposition of linguistic homogeneity, then, is a consequence of the desire to impose homogeneity or unity upon the national body” (218). Throughout, these languages become transnational as they travel

across national boundaries with the protagonist, but the hierarchical position gets altered and that is how it affects the characters in a different country.

A key question posed by the narrator in *The Tattooed Soldier* regarding the dominant US language, when Antonio's English is being assessed, is interesting: "Granted, he did not speak English well, but who did?" (4). Language, translation, and the ways meanings change according to environment, are all important in texts read as *testimonio* not just during the eighties but also today. Can we then say that truth and authenticity are still the basis of seeing a text as *testimonio*? Do they not get "lost in translation" by a narrator who struggles with two languages to express her or himself, and by a translator who then translates it into a third language? Can we then read them as literature as much as factual or truthful accounts? Do these texts "truly" convey the narrator's thoughts to the listener? If so, why did *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* become the focus of attention for its purported lies and manipulation, and trigger such controversy? As long as we consider verifiability to be the unique aspect of Latin American *testimonio*, we will overlook the nuances of the text. Even as a witness account, a *testimonio* differs from that of another witness in that the principal source of narration is memory. Thus, the way the narrator recalls his or her story is what should be emphasized in testimonial readings, rather than their accuracy or referentiality. Francine Masiello states that: "despite the postmodern scholars' claim for mobile identities, their subjects become resources once again for 'authenticity' in Latin America" (*The Art of Transition* 116). Are "authenticity" or "verifiability," then, factors desired by the North American scholars (or the market) to define Latin America? In other words, if one wishes to investigate real and authentic subjects, one should look towards Latin America; does that mean western or North American critics fulfill their discourse in the US by objectifying the South? *Testimonio* is and always was more than just

a truthful account by a witness, particularly in the Latin American context. It is a subaltern voice, an alternative to official history and a narrative about a resistance struggle. Such characteristics were the defining elements and reason to canonize *testimonio* as a genre to be read and studied. However, *testimonio* was declared dead, in part because critics were unable to look beyond the issue of its verifiability.

In all the texts that I analyze here, English is the narrative medium. Nevertheless, characters use Spanish phrases and sentences from time to time when thinking out loud or when conversing with other Latin Americans. Therefore, unlike classic *testimonio*, these are a mixture of both languages (English and Spanish). Though English is employed much more often than Spanish, there are instances when the protagonists do not find adequate translations in one language or the other. One such example is in *The Tattooed Soldier*, when Antonio becomes homeless and cannot find the right word to describe his situation in his own language. He says: “voy a ser uno de los ‘homeless’” (5). The narrator explains this use of an English word: “No Spanish equivalent captured the shame and sooty desperation of the condition, and so this compound, borrowed word would have to do: home-less” (5).

Latin American *testimonio* became popular internationally in large part because it was usually quickly translated into English; in today’s fiction we see a similar trend of either translating or narrating these texts into English. *The Tattooed Soldier* and *The Long Night of the White Chickens* were both written in English, while *Odyssey to the North* was translated into English the same year (1999) as its original Spanish publication. Apart from making their work popular and accessible internationally, authors today are also transnational in terms of their origin and/or upbringing. For instance, Hector Tobar was born in Guatemala and brought up in Los Angeles; Francisco Goldman was born and brought up in the United States by a Jewish

father and Guatemalan mother. Transnational phenomena which were a strong background presence in reading texts as *testimonio* (in the eighties) become even more pronounced now, with their authors being transnational, bilingual, and choosing English over Spanish to write about Central America. English thus becomes the preferred language to convey stories that also manifest the importance of the transnational aspect for *testimonio*. As Beasley-Murray mentions, “the genre was above all a point of contact for the construction of a transnational common” (*Posthegemony* 268). Hence, we should appreciate the role of transnationalism in the testimonial genre and its impact on readers outside its native country. Francine Masiello observes that North America is a market for Latin American narratives and often objectifies the issues raised therein, moulding them according to North American tastes. She provides a telling example of how issues related to women are traded in the North, when she notes that “books published by North American scholars give a different twist to this problem. They show us that women in fact exemplify individual values, but often in response to a narrative project whose laws of operation have been set down in the North” (*The Art of Transition* 112-13). She adds: “It is this hunger for community, often a pursuit of a lost world that might restore an earlier way of being, that lies at the heart of many North American texts that regard Latin American culture” (115). Perhaps it is this objectifying perspective on Latin American issues in North America that encouraged the global market to translate testimonial texts (classic *testimonios*) into English.

3.6 Cities as Protagonists

Alongside transnationalism, another notable aspect in these texts is the role that cities play in the narratives and how they are juxtaposed against each other (generally, between cities of the United States, considered as important places, and cities of Latin or Central America generally perceived as chaotic and dangerous) to relate violence, nostalgia and migrant tales. Besides

giving us a holistic view on the protagonists' daily life, their transformation and providing a background on where the action is taking place, cities of powerful countries like the USA and from the not-so-powerful, but violent and unstable countries like Guatemala and El Salvador, are also compared. In *Odyssey to the North* Washington D.C. and San Salvador are the cities where the story takes place; in *The Tattooed Soldier*, it is Los Angeles and Guatemala City; and in *The Long Night of White Chickens* it is Boston and Guatemala City. The continuous comparison between cities North and South suggests that these urban settings on either side of the divide between center and periphery share the same culture of resistance against authority, and even some of the same landscape when the immigrants think of their homeland. The texts reflect that these cities are beyond nations, that they might be restricted within the geographical boundary, but they are international or transnational cities in themselves. As Linda Craft notes of *Odyssey to the North*: "El Salvador and, we could argue, Latin America live and work in Bencastro's United States; El Salvador is in the United States" ("Mario Bencastro's Diaspora" 164). The juxtaposition of the cities (of the United States with the cities of Central America) addresses the similarities that exist between them when referred in terms of violence and social unrest. However, it also brings forth the issue that the city accepts every person and has a space for everyone though the policies and law of countries try to overlook that; they may call them "illegal," "unwanted," etc., try to push them out (mostly from the powerful cities). Everyone can call a city as home even though the cities are demarcated and categorized for every section of the society. In Craft's words: "Salvadorans are on the move, active agents in rewriting history both north and south of the border. Bencastro is one of their scribes" (156). Immigrants not only call the city home but "rewrite" the history of that city by sharing their past life, their language and culture. Nevertheless, Jinah Kim states that: "The force of their presence calls to attention the

limitations of ‘nation’ and ‘citizen’ in determining rights and belonging. Immigrant and migrant groups push against existing parameters to express their right to take up space” (“Immigrants, Racial Citizens” 38).

In the works discussed here, cities have sections that are populated by homeless immigrants from different countries. A city’s parks, streets, freeways and abandoned spaces become home for these immigrants. For instance, in *The Tattooed Soldier* José Juan claims an empty lot as a home when he and Antonio have to leave their apartment and start living as homeless: “‘A family, a rich family used to live here.’ He walked around the empty property tracing squares and rectangles, the geometry of a home that had been demolished many years ago. ‘Right here, this was their garden. That was their garage.’ José Juan jumped a few steps to his left. ‘Over here was the bedroom’” (15). He adds: “‘We have a home, our own little rancho . . . a nice piece of property next to downtown’” (16). Yet the place is described as covered with “dozens of tents and shacks perched on its muddy earth” (15). However, the same city-space can also be occupied by the most powerful and important people of the world. For instance, in *Odyssey to the North*: “Those nocturnal inhabitants represented something like the ‘United Nations of misfortune,’ headquartered in the park, so unlike the United Nations, the international entity located in a beautiful skyscraper between 42nd and 48th streets along the bank of the East River, not very far from there, made up of important representatives from all the countries of the world” (51). In this context, Jinah Kim refers to Saskia Sassen’s concept of “the ‘global city’ . . . a phenomenon of the late-20th-century global economy, which brings together transnational elites and migrant workers in a single urban social space, yet whose political, economic, and cultural connections defy the boundaries of a single nation-state” (38).

The narrative shows how a US city is shaken by the riot of 1992, at times to calm down the violent actions of the people like in *Odyssey to the North* where the narrator describes: “perhaps the rain was the only thing capable of stopping the events of that tragic Sunday night, so violent and unexpected” (93); or at times to participate in the activity like: “at that moment, a light drizzle descended, as if spring also wished to make her presence known on that night unprecedented in the history of the neighborhood” (93). In *The Tattooed Soldier*: “the boy had disappeared into the smoky air on Washington Boulevard. There were many fires burning on this street now. The sunlight retreated, erasing the shadows of running people from the sidewalks. Flames from a burning warehouse ignited a palm tree and leapt up the trunk to the crown” (284).

The novel’s narrative also juxtaposes “rich” or “First World” cities against the “poor” and “Third World” by showing their violent connections. It alerts us to the fact that the city not only contains people from Central America, but also has elements of these countries when it comes to dealing with riots. Such issues are shown to be global, and not simply a matter of individual nations or cities. As in *The Tattooed Soldier*: “the blood of Los Angeles was colorless in the black-and-white light of the tunnel. The blood of Guatemala was crimson under a tropical sun. The blood of Los Angeles might soon begin to fade. The blood of Guatemala was indelible” (304). Also, the narrator compares the riot of the United States with a protest march in Guatemala and demonstrates the chaos in both the cities during social unrest: “Elena would have loved to see the throngs of nannies taking over the streets of an American city, like the garbage workers they had joined in Guatemala all those years ago” (306). The juxtaposition is clear also in *Odyssey to the North* when a riot is described as “‘like being in Salvador,’ ‘this is like the battles we have all the time over there. Like when the government forces attack the political demonstrations to break them up, and the people respond throwing rocks and bottles to defend

themselves” (93). The chaos but also the revolutionary possibility of transnational connection becomes clear as for a day the marginalized people become powerful and share equal footing with the rich. *The Tattooed Soldier* describes this as “a day without submissiveness,” “A day when all the pretty objects in the store windows would mock them no longer” (283). It is a day for revenge as Antonio kills Guillermo in MacArthur Park where he often went to play chess; it is also the day when looters made off with “car batteries, repair manuals, windshield wipers, cans of STP oil treatment, rearview mirrors, paper air filters” (281). Hence in various ways, in various places, similar struggles were “being fought all over the city, by huge crowds, masses of people ... violence welling in the eyes of the crowd, the march of police forming battle lines” (272).

In *Odyssey to the North*, the chaos in Washington D.C. is narrated by highlighting the incident and its consequences in newspapers: “The gunshot that wounded Daniel was only the spark which set off the time bomb that had been waiting to explode in the community due to frustration and discontent for various reasons. One of them is the police mistreatment that our community has suffered repeatedly” (132). Though the riot was against the government’s decision to release police officers who had beaten up a black man, the chaos was such that other marginalized groups of the city took advantage of the situation. Hence the dialogue between Antonio and José Juan in *The Tattooed Soldier*: ““it’s because of that *negro* who got beat up,’ Antonio said, thinking out loud. ‘Because the police beat him up’. ‘What negro? They’re Latinos,’ José Juan said. ‘they don’t know any negro. They don’t care about any negro’” (281). A collective feeling arises, imbued with power: “No one will catch us. No one will catch us because we are hundreds” (281). *Odyssey to the North* describes the repercussions of the shooting as word spreads through the city: “News of the man shot by the police spread immediately, inflaming the tempers of the inhabitants and unleashing an unprecedented wave of

disturbances in the neighborhood” (92). It goes on: “Chaos invaded the streets, taking on violent dimensions, resulting in clashes between indignant demonstrators and police officers attempting to establish order” (92). While the police are trying to wrest back control over the city: “the clashes were concentrated on Mount Pleasant Street. On one corner a huge bonfire burned, lighting up the whole neighborhood and completely consuming the Church’s Fried Chicken restaurant” (92). Suddenly, cities that are notionally “American,” due to their geographical location and distinct lifestyle, begin if only briefly to resemble other world cities wracked by violence and struggle. The comparison and the resemblance are not only because of the protest but also because of the people who are leading the protest or actively involved in it; they are mostly immigrants from these “chaotic and disturbed” countries and others as well. Kim cites Lowe and explains: “The nation has always depended on foreign labor, but positions the ‘immigrant’ against the ‘nation.’ ... Spaces carved out by immigrants in the United States contain an oppositional history and demonstrate how these spaces constitute exceptional space; that is, they transcend the nation, even as they are of the nation” (45). The struggle that immigrants experience in their native country, and the hope with which they come to the North, are questioned here. The new struggles they face may be different, but not insignificant, which is why the narrator in *Odyssey to the North* describes the immigrants’ sentiments as a “time bomb” that has accumulated over the years and is waiting to explode.

In *The Long Night of White Chickens*, there are no riots, but disturbances play a role in making the reader aware of Guatemala City’s dangers and mysteries. At the same time, we are shown how this place resembles other international cities, with its military base “that looks just like a Disneyland Castle with its bright gray castellated walls” and its “tree-shaded grove of pedestaled statues like something out of imperial Rome” (72). These elements show how in some

ways the Guatemalan capital resembles international cities yet demonstrate its specific dangers. For instance, the sensation that something is wrong, or that Guatemala is mysterious, comes through in one of Roger's comments. He describes how, when they went to Guatemala to claim Flor's body and bring it back to the US, they could sense the "smell of the morgue" in the hotel where they were staying. He notes it felt "like an infection in my nostrils had grown weirdly stronger, much stronger, as if it wasn't merely some understandably lingering olfactory trauma of our own but had suddenly been blown into our faces by a rising wind, only there was no wind, just the smell, all around us, as if it didn't come from us but from the statues or the military base or from a nearby ditch filled with rotting ravens that we couldn't see or from somewhere ... I wanted to gag. I felt scared" (73). The elements of Disneyland and the renowned architecture of Rome that are to be found in Guatemala City, instead of inspiring fun or admiration, may depict danger and violence. Like in the earlier texts we saw how violence and danger that are commonly associated with Central American countries can also be found in the United States in similar circumstances. Can we then say that cities are transnational in themselves even though they may be confined within national geographic boundaries?

Cities are also juxtaposed against each other for describing nostalgia. We observe such narration in *Odyssey to the North* when Calixto's feelings are recounted in the text: "He opened his eyes and before his eyes weary gaze stretched the highway along the Potomac River that separated Virginia from Washington. The blurred images of home refused to leave his memory, and Calixto thought, 'Really, I'm not far from my people or my home. I have them as close to my heart as if I had never left them'" (192). Critic Linda Craft states that: "Bencastro pursues several strategies to construct a Salvadoran identity "away from home," beginning with a discourse of origins and nostalgia, moving through a deconstruction of myths and official

histories, remembering suffering and other shared experience, and narrating transformation” (“Mario Bencastro’s Diaspora” 156-157). *The Long Night of White Chickens* shifts quite smoothly between Guatemala and the United States; but it never directly addresses issues related to immigration. For instance, the transitions take place between or even within paragraphs as when Moya (Flor’s lover and Roger’s friend) comes to the United States in exile in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and compares the landscape with Guatemala: “Feeling sluggishly disinterested, he looked out at the view, the choppy gray river and the complicated mass of the city: the ancient-looking red and brown brick of the buildings, roofs of oxidized copper, domes, skyscrapers, the dead trees and the snow-patched dead grass along the river, bridges, seagulls, the unbroken flow of traffic” (214). On the other hand, just after establishing Moya’s feelings and observation of life in the United States, the third person narration returns to Guatemala where Moya remembers himself sitting with Flor and recalls “the qualities, textures, and odors of impoverished and malnourished infants’ *caca* and the endemic illness” (216). Similarly, Roger tells us that he “went on living in New York, tending bar, neither happy nor unhappy with this way of life, good enough at it and sure that one day I’d get around to changing it all. While a separate part of me went on living in Guatemala with Flor and the ghosts of centuries” (187). Roger also describes his house in the (fictional) New England suburb of Namonet as:

 painted happy tropical shades of sky blue and yellow, and because my mother had placed scrolled Spanish iron grillwork under the windows and the actual heavy, baroque iron door knocker from her childhood home in Guatemala on our flimsy hollow-core front door, and had similarly decorated the inside with many Spanish-Guatemalan kitschy flourishes, and of course because my mother and Flor lived there, our house was known to everybody at Namonet High as the Copacabana. (52)

We have seen the transnational nature of the cities in these novels. It does not matter whether it is a “peaceful and developed” city in the United States or “a chaotic, violent and disturbing” city in Guatemala or Salvador: cities interchange their roles when faced with a similar situation and at the same time they can be read as *testimonio* since they contain similar elements (resistance, violence, and social upheaval) to texts from the eighties and the nineties. Yet these concerns are not the only ones (as we have observed in these fictional narratives). There are new and contemporary elements to be analyzed and discussed in Central American literature read as *testimonio* in a post-war context.

3.7 Conclusion

The transnationalism of the testimonial genre was as evident in the eighties as much as today. But this is one of the many aspects of the genre that were generally overlooked, as so much critical discussion focused on the subaltern voice, oppression, and resistance to the state. These characteristics are important, but by looking more broadly we may re-consider some of the received ideas about the genre; we have to go beyond the familiar topics of well-worn debates and search for elements that were ignored yet important in texts considered to be testimonial.

This chapter has focused on themes that have been little discussed in classic *testimonios*, but which further show that the line between literature and *testimonio* is not as distinct as the generic definitions of *testimonio* suggest. Transnationalism is one such aspect that shows varied ways to approach *testimonio*, and at the same time challenges our understanding of literature and *testimonio* as genres in strict opposition to each other. Re-reading texts as *testimonio* today, looking for elements that have been missed in our previous readings, ensures that the “moment of *testimonio*” persists. Beasley-Murray suggests: “Rather than reading *testimonio* as the authentic voice of a particular Latin American people, it is better to see how it connects with a

much more disparate global network, with cultural effects that cannot so easily be mapped on to any individual state formation. In this sense, the genre actively resists the reductionism that hegemonic projects promote: it tends to proliferation rather than unity” (*Posthegemony* 268).

Contemporary fiction from Central America conveys stories about migration that are as diverse as is the migrant community itself. In fact, Arturo Arias states, “Central American migration to the United States includes, after all, a heterogeneous array of social groups, among which we can name anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans, small groups of Hondurans and Costa Ricans, and indigenous, Afro-Caribbean, and ‘Ladino’ (mestizo) sectors from each of these nations” (*Taking Their Word* 204-205). Beyond highlighting this heterogeneity, these recent texts also compare life in different cities (both in the United States and in Central America), adding many elements to migrant tales. Read as *testimonio*, these narratives challenge not only our understandings of the testimonial genre itself, but also our approach to the literary. Like the migrant experience, testimonial reading need not be homogeneous but can “[tend] to proliferation.” The contemporary Central American texts discussed here are examples of the possibility of reading *testimonio* today, and the ways in which such readings keep *testimonio* alive and connect the past with the present. These texts emphasize that injustice and oppression are still very much part of Central American reality. Limiting our approach to these narratives by seeing them simply as works of fiction simplifies them—by passing over their referential qualities as they incorporate discursive elements from journalism or historical narrative—even as reading them only as *testimonio* subject to verification wilfully obscures their literary aspects. We will develop this argument about the overlaps between fiction and *testimonio* in the next chapter, in which I explore how the past and factors like mystery, suspense, and thrill interfere with the present; how

in classic *testimonio*, such literary elements challenged notions of authenticity. I also examine the different media that can be used to review the past in Central America.

Chapter Four: Memory Haunts the Present: Central American Literature and Cinema as

Testimonio

4.1 Introduction: The Concept of Memory

Memory connects the past and the present; it is the path that permits us to re-view past images and experience them. However, memory does not follow a linear trajectory, for there are many factors that come into play while remembering the past, and some past memories return more easily than others. Such factors include what we want to remember and what we want to forget. What happens to the events that we want to forget? Are we in fact able to forget, or do memory and the past impose themselves upon us regardless? If so, how? As Astrid Erill states, it is not only important to know *what* is that we remember but *how* we remember it.³⁵ This emphasis on how we remember the past indicates that our memories vary, and that perhaps it is different for everyone. But can the past ever be remembered honestly and accurately? (3). The vagaries of memory and our varied perceptions about the past mean that we access and remember it in diverse ways; and that “history” therefore is heterogeneous.

Memory is always a struggle between what we want to remember and what we want to forget; in Freudian terms, we “repress” those memories that we want (consciously or not) to forget. Freud argues that “repressed memories” are particularly shocking and therefore resisted by the conscious mind as part of a mechanism of self-defence or “self-respect”: “Repression ... proceeds from the ego; we might say with greater precision that it proceeds from the self-respect of the ego” (“On Narcissism” 415). Freud adds that repression may function differently for different people: “We can say that the one man has set up an *ideal* in himself by which he

³⁵ “[It is] true not only for what is remembered (facts, data), but also for how it is remembered, that is, for the quality and meaning the past assumes” (“Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction” 7).

measures his actual ego, while the other has formed no such ideal. For the ego the formation of an ideal would be the conditioning factor of repression” (“On Narcissism” 415). Michael Billig explains:

Freud’s interest lay in those unconscious beliefs which, he claimed, “cannot become conscious” because “a certain force opposes them.” These beliefs are so shocking or painful that something stops them from making the journey, which the preconscious beliefs find so simple. Instead of slipping into the field of awareness, they are turned aside—they are repressed. Thus, the secret beliefs, unlike the “ordinary” preconscious ones, cannot become conscious, for they are constantly being driven away. (*Freudian Repression* 16)

Billig further describes repressed thoughts as secrets that “must be repressed: and the fact that we are repressing them must also be repressed” (13). Such repressed thoughts are stored in the unconscious mind; the unconscious mind does not exist when we are born, but we create it through repression itself. He adds: “Unless we do something—unless we repress or push aside thoughts—we won’t have an unconscious” (17). In the case of a traumatic past, like Central America’s, repressed memory becomes a significant aspect that should be addressed in the present in its diversity.

We can distinguish between individual memory and collective memory. Every individual remembers an event differently, and therefore every story about the past varies. However, our individual memories are also related to our social identities: for example, our class, caste, language, or religion.³⁶ Thus, individual memories are not formed in isolation, but they are in

³⁶ Jeffrey K. Olick describes individual memory as “tak[ing] place with social materials, within social contexts, and in response to social cues. Even when we do it alone, we do so as social beings with reference to our social identities” (“From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products” 156).

continuous dialogue with their surroundings. Nicolas Argenti and Katharina Schramm cite philosopher Maurice Halbwachs, for whom “individual memories are necessarily shared memories, and memories that are not shared are rapidly forgotten; they are therefore not memories at all” (5).

There may be a common thread of incidents that define a memory as collective, but the approaches to such events in individual memories are diverse. With collective memory, a group or community re-creates the past together with their individual memory, or several individual memories bring back collectively a similar account from the past in the present. Jean-Christophe Marcel and Laurent Mucchielli elaborate on Halbwachs’s concept of individual and collective memory and mention that individual memory on its own is fragmented and when these fragments come together they create a complete narrative of the past events.³⁷ At the same time, they cite Kirmayer, who states, “if a family or a community agrees that a trauma did not happen, then it vanishes from collective memory and the possibility for the individual memory is severely strained” (9). On the other hand, Rosalind Shaw argues that individual and collective memories are often interlinked and distinguished only with difficulty.³⁸ Thus we observe that there is a strong connection between individual and collective memory, and that each depends on the other. However, as soon as we consider the relationship between individual and collective memory, we should ask which (or whose) individual memories are dominant enough to become part of collective memory and in turn, perhaps, marginalize or suppress other memories, the memories of other individuals or sub-groups.

³⁷ “The past is not really preserved in the individually memory. ‘Fragments’ persist there, but not complete recollections. What makes them true memories are collective representations. The collective memory is made of those ‘instruments’ used by the conscious individual to recompose a coherent image of the past” (142-143).

³⁸ “Attempts to restrict the term ‘memory’ either to individual perception or to verbally discursive remembering confront a further problem. The dichotomies on which these categorizations are based—individual versus social memories and discursive versus non-discursive memories—often tend to be blurred, incomplete, unstable, reversible” (“Afterword” 253).

Individual and collective memory became especially significant in Latin America during and after the dictatorial regimes and civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s, as memory was invoked to narrate tales of injustice. These narratives emerged in the 1980s as the testimonial genre, which focused on government repression and popular resistance. As Mackenbach affirms: “en los años ochenta y noventa se volvió un lugar común hacer énfasis en una vinculación muy estrecha entre el testimonio y la historiografía, porque el testimonio soporta las pruebas de veredicción, se refiere a acontecimientos que han ocurrido, en sentido estricto, en la vida social, y por lo tanto, tienen existencia fuera del discurso” (“Narrativas de la memoria” 237). *Testimonio* emphasized collective memory narrated by an individual; such narratives also brought into focus the national, political, historical, and cultural identity of a country. Therefore, texts that involve memory also engage with issues related to identity during and after violence. Individual and collective memory can be described as “autobiographical memory” and “cultural memory.”³⁹ Olick explains: “The former concerns the events of one’s own life that one remembers because they were experienced directly. The latter refers to residues of events by virtue of which groups claim a continuous identity through time” (“From Collective Memory”156). *Testimonio* becomes a platform whereby, by remembering and telling their individual stories and by associating them with a collective group, trauma victims may negotiate their identity formation.

In *testimonio*, a narrator recounts past experience from his or her individual memory but asserts that narrative as part of a collective memory; thus, preserving an event that has been experienced by an entire community.⁴⁰ But *testimonio*’s critics such as David Stoll argue that some particular individual stories came to dominate communal narratives, hindering the

³⁹ Jeffrey K. Olick mentions Halbwach’s notion of relating individual and collective memory to “autobiographical memory” and “cultural memory.”

⁴⁰ Beverley” states: “testimonio constitutes an affirmation of the individual self *in a collective mode*” (“The Margin at the Center” 29).

exploration of diversity in the past. In the specific case of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, he claims that Menchú's story "has been so appealing" that it has sidelined other indigenous stories of Guatemala: "it has overshadowed other Mayan perspectives on the violence" ("The Battle of Rigoberta" 393). *Testimonio*, however, is a reading technique that uses tools from literature and art to challenge the homogeneous approach towards narratives; it has the potential to acknowledge the past and connect it to the present. We have seen how a focus on transnationalism is one way to critique the dominant readings of *testimonio* that, at the same time, recognizes the past and its relation to the present. In this chapter, we see that memory can also critique official histories while helping to link the past with the present.

Nelly Richard defends the reading strategy of *testimonio*. Drawing on examples from Chile, she notes that under neoliberalism memory can be appropriated by both the market and the State. She quotes José Joaquín Brunner, who argues that the military dictatorship in Chile "ocupó tres medios de control: la 'represión,' el 'mercado' y la 'televisión'" (188). Richard observes that in the transition from dictatorship to post-dictatorship, the Chilean state used two of these methods of control, "el 'mercado' y la 'televisión,' como instrumentos que había usado el totalitarismo para disolver lo *político-ideológico* (como volumen y conflicto) en la serie—plana—de lo *técnico* y lo *mediático*" (188). But Richard goes on to claim that *testimonio*'s invocation of memory can subvert these forms of controlling, by uncovering stories and events that have been sidelined by the media and the market. For Richard:

El testimonio busca reinscribir la verdad en primera persona de una experiencia intransferible que, como tal, puede llegar a conmovir el orden de razones y hechos a través del cual el archivo y la estadística clasifican, neutralmente, los abusos. El testimonio logra forzar la atención sobre algo que la historia a menudo rechaza como

simple índice residual; ... el testimonio consigna el residuo de ese algo improcesable cuyo accidente subjetivo desvía el orden general de las verdades objetivas del recuento histórico. Pero la improcesabilidad crítica del residuo testimonial puede, en circunstancias de mercado, llegar a comercializarse como el exceso figurativo de un horror domesticado. (“Crítica de la memoria” 192)

To avoid such commercialization of the testimonial reading strategy, the readers or the literary critics of *testimonio* have to keep using diverse tools from various disciplines so that voices against injustice can be heard in *testimonios*—and one such tool is memory. Mackenbach suggests that many recent accounts of individual memories in contemporary Central American texts, such as Giaconda Belli’s *El país bajo mi piel*, “ya no pretenden dar voz a los sin voz, sino son abierta y declaradamente textos de ex líderes—además de las clases medias y altas—[lo que] permite que en un contexto en que la pretensión de hablar en lugar de los subalternos ha perdido su atractivo, el reclamo de representatividad colectiva de la memoria individual entre por la puerta trasera” (“Narrativas de la memoria” 241). We can therefore see that the role of memory in relation to *testimonio* in Latin American literature is complex, in that the distinction between individual and collective memory can be problematic, can create controversy and debate about the past (as we saw in the case of Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio*), but can also serve as a medium through which to look back at a diverse past and better understand the present situation. However, the appropriation of the testimonial genre by the market or the “testimonial residue”⁴¹ can restrict heterogeneous perceptions of the past, as such an approach tends to focus on memories that claim to be collective rather than taking account of the many diverse individual stories that collectively raise a voice against injustice.

⁴¹ As Richard argues: “Pero la improcesabilidad crítica del residuo testimonial puede, en circunstancias de mercado, llegar a comercializarse como el exceso figurativo de un horror domesticado” (192).

I argue in this chapter that the imposition of a homogenous story in place of heterogeneous narratives is less a consequence of the texts themselves than of the ways in which they have been read. Classic *testimonios* were already diverse in their narrative strategy and did indeed focus on a variety of problems that press on the present from the past, but our restricted readings valued some issues over others and highlighted individual narrators (supposedly) speaking on behalf of the community. The characteristic of an individual narrator who can tell the story of an entire community emerged during the definition and canonization of the *testimonio* genre. It allowed for an important distinction from autobiographies, which focus on the “I” as a narrator speaks for him- or herself, whereas in *testimonios* the narrative “I” is taken to stand in for an entire community. In John Beverley’s words:

There is implicit an ideology of individualism in the very convention of the autobiographical form that is built on the notion of a coherent, self-evident, self-conscious, commanding subject that appropriates literature precisely as a means of “self-expression” and that in turn constructs textually for the reader the liberal imaginary of a unique, “free,” autonomous ego as the natural form of being and public achievement. By contrast, as I have suggested, in *testimonio* the narrative “I” has the status of what linguists call a shifter—a linguistic function that can be assumed indiscriminately by anyone. Recalling Rigoberta Menchú’s narrative proposition, the meaning of her *testimonio* lies not in its uniqueness but in its ability to stand for the experience of her community as a whole. (35)

Yet this distinction, which differentiated the reading of *testimonios* from other kinds of narratives, especially from hegemonic narrative styles, and which helped to define a voice from and for the subaltern, soon became unsustainable. Was the strategy appropriated by the market?

In what follows, I focus on characteristics related to memory (such as the way in which subjects recall not only traumatic experiences and the way it affects their lives, but also life before trauma or violence, and memory as mystery) that were present in classic *testimonios* but were ignored in many readings. We will see that a testimonial approach to a text can be diverse and does not conform to a single definition. In fact, any one definition can limit the varied possible readings by insisting, for instance, that *testimonio* is always and only about solidarity or resistance in the face of oppression.⁴² The other aspect of this chapter is then to revive the reading of *testimonio* in the present day. However much critics have emphasized the end of the genre, the current situation in Central America tells another story. In Central America, the civil wars between state and guerrilla brought violence, brutality, poverty, and chaos. Though these wars have now ended, social unrest continues, as is depicted in the region's literature and films. Post-war society was supposed to be at peace with itself, but continued unrest propels people to look back to the past, to resolve tensions in the present or to understand the present situation in a larger frame. Nicole Caso states: "With a shared legacy of fear and imposed silences, there is much at stake in voicing particular perspectives about a painful and traumatic past, or even about a daunting and complicated present" (*Practicing Memory* 2). Hence, I ask whether it is the "daunting and complicated" present that stimulates writers to look back at the past for solutions, or whether it is the unresolved "painful and traumatic" past that influences them to keep talking about the past. Memory plays a significant role not only in Central American fiction but also in Central American film. Thus, contemporary fiction and film can be read as *testimonio*, as a means to relate the past with the present. Memory is not only about trauma or about the terrible

⁴² Moreiras states: "From this perspective, solidarity, although not in any case to be excluded, no longer can be the sole motivation for us to engage *testimonio* as its readers and disseminators" ("The Aura of *Testimonio*" 196).

situation that Central America went through in the past. It is also about the suspense, the thrill, and the danger that existed in the past and can be revisited in the present.

4.2 *Memory and Neoliberalism*

We have seen that memory is key to Central American literature, films, and documentaries.

Richard argues that we not only need a critical memory that “sea capaz de oponerse al desgaste, a la borradura del recuerdo que sumerge el pasado en la indiferencia” (188); we also need a

critique of memory that is “vigilante, sospeche de la abusiva comercialización del drama a cargo de relatos sensacionalistas o, simplemente, negligentes” (188). She further states: “*Memoria crítica y crítica de la memoria* son los recursos que la práctica intelectual debe movilizar para

seguir desatando guerras de interpretación en torno a los significados y los usos del recuerdo. De no hacerlo, o bien se anestesia la sensibilidad del presente o bien se ritualiza el pasado en simples conmemoraciones oficiales” (188). We note that narratives of a violent past should be brought

back now and again in the present to maintain the complexity of memory. Thus, art and literature become the medium of expression for such traumatic stories. Nicole Caso asks: “What kinds of stories are told about the past when authors choose the fictional realm to engage in

representations of history? Perhaps more importantly, why access memory through fiction?”

(2).⁴³ Also according to Richard: “el arte y la literatura deben explorar las fallas del sentido, las opacidades de la representación: todo lo que el recuerdo oficial o la memoria institucional

tienden a suprimir para que estos desechos rebeldes no inquieten su tarea de aquietamiento del pasado” (192).⁴⁴ Contemporary Central American works revisit the past through memory not

⁴³ As Toni Morrison states: “Whenever there was an unusually violent incident, or a scatological one, or something ‘excessive,’ one finds the writer taking literary conventions of the day” (*The Site of Memory* 69).

⁴⁴ Other Central American critics like Alexandra Ortiz Wallner note: “por un lado, la dimensión en que la literatura se vuelve el medio para la representación de las memorias extraliterarias; ... la dimensión en la cual la literatura se

simply to tell new stories, but also to subvert official narratives. Thus, as Caso and Richard point to the importance of literature or art to register social tensions, at the same time these art forms emphasize the connections between past and present.

Richard argues for “*memoria crítica*” and “*crítica de la memoria*” as resources that can address the “guerras de interpretación,” to avoid simplifying or homogenizing the past. Narratives recovered through memory can interfere with official facts and lead to a more complex understanding of the past. However, the discontinuity between the past and the present can be harmful for society. The past can be looked at as events that happened earlier and have no relevance in the present. For the present is “now,” is “fresh,” and enables a sensation of “living in the moment.” Nelly Richard talks about the present as transparent and controlled by the state on the one hand and multinationals on the other.⁴⁵ Does neoliberal society, thus, offer up the past and the present in this disconnected manner by erasing “any critical-reflexive interval”? Memory may be a prominent source of information about a traumatic past, but does it reveal anything about the present? Richard reflects on contemporary globalization and warns against “a globalization that dissipates the value of historicity painfully ciphered in the experience of the dictatorship, making of what we thought unerasable ever more blurred” (6). When past and present are not linked, we tend to lose interest and distance ourselves from the past.

Why is there a need to bring back the past through the medium of memory again and again in the present? What is it that official history and its narratives cannot capture but that can be seen in stories narrated through memory? As Argenti and Schramm state: “It is precisely that

convierte en un medio para la (re)construcción de las memorias, y, finalmente, la dimensión en que la memoria es un trabajo literario, en donde la memoria trabaja *en la literatura*” (91).

⁴⁵ “Practical reason, direct language, and useful knowledge are nowadays the leading partners in this campaign of transparency (denotative realism, referential explicitness) through which powerful bureaucracies and technocracies of meaning conspire daily to erase any critical-reflexive interval that seeks to complicate communicative transactions with any suspended or dilated mode of interpretation” (5).

memory cannot be trusted as history that it needs to be explored, not as a record of the past, but of the present of those whose interests, views, experiences and life-worlds are somehow inimical to or have fallen outside of the historical project” (3). Richard also emphasizes the role of memory in the Chilean context, and raises concerns about how post-dictatorship governments or the market attempt to homogenize differences and narratives from the past so that “this passive chain of differences is juxtaposed indifferently, one alongside the other, without confronting their values so as not to upset the neutral axis of reconciliation of the totality” (16). Diversity is allowed, but that diversity must be “regulated by certain pacts, understandings, and negotiations that would contain its excesses so as not to revive the collision of ideological forces that divided us in the past” (16). Mackenbach further notes the subversion of official history or a “true” narrative in the context of Central American literature: “Las declaraciones de los testigos ampliamente documentadas están llenas de contradicciones ... y en su polifonía se niegan a cualquier esclarecimiento “de la verdad.” Incluso el intento de contar la historia “desde abajo”, desde la perspectiva de los subalternos ... no resulta en una nueva verdad alternativa” (“La historia como pretexto de literatura” 186). Individual memories are diverse, as every individual remembers the past distinctly, but many such distinct tales of past experience may be silenced as neoliberal society does not give memory the scope to explore that past in its diversity. In other words, narrating stories from the perspective of subalterns will not result in a new alternative to the official history (as Mackenbach argues) if we confine our perception only to certain factors, like solidarity and resistance. Which means that we are still abiding by the rules of the market, *i.e.* restricting the exploration of memory in a varied way. Thus, subaltern stories that reflect upon the past conflicts should also be brought back in the present in a heterogeneous way and then they can subvert the official or dominant histories.

We observe a similar problem with the testimonial genre. The repetitive emphasis on similar past events (such as oppression, resistance, struggle, and solidarity) in texts read as *testimonio* by critics has exhausted so much so that the reading and discussion of such texts have become stagnant. Such a repetitive way to approach these stories also blurs their present significance and leads to boredom—as we do not connect with the present situation and as there is no fresh material to continue discussing the past. Francine Masiello in *The Art of Transition* argues that such a marketing tactic “paints a sheen of apparent neutrality on social contradiction, erasing strands of memory that bound individuals to their past and suppressing the discussion of ‘value’” (3). Reading *testimonio* came to an end when such readings focused on similar issues from the past, restricting our perception of the text.

Memory can subvert the conventional stories of the past, but if appropriated by the market, it can lose this ability to challenge homogenous narratives of the time, will bring back similar events which will then lead to stagnancy or indifference towards such events. As Richard says of the Chilean context: “The urban-popular is one of those holdover dialects that the compulsive modernization of the Chilean Transition seeks to make uniform at all costs, so that its heterogeneous encrustations and transplants of stirred-up memories should not spoil the shiny geometry that urbanizes the city in such a way that, between shop windows and neon signs, there is nothing without brilliance or sparkle, nothing that is shamefully dirty, nothing disastrously poor” (8). Thus, this tactic to uniformize memory erases the past or makes the past meaningless and useless in the present times, but memory has the capability to tell different tales from the past, to bring forth “the contradictory plurality of meaning and disordering the planes and surfaces of representation that ideologies intend to keep smooth” (12). In this chapter, we will see how contemporary Central American fiction and film bring out such tales of injustices from

the present day and relate them to the region's past, thus maintaining a continuity not only with the past and the present but also with the reading strategy of *testimonio*.

I will address present-day narratives as *testimonio* and argue that *testimonio* as a tool can be used to approach a creative medium, which is not limited to writing but includes visual narratives, too. At the same time, fiction is an important tool in retelling the past or revisiting the unresolved past incidents, as Morrison argues: “memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of these people. Only the act of imagination can help me” (71). She further adds that imagination is a characteristic of fictional narratives.⁴⁶ Horacio Castellanos Moya notes specifically about El Salvador that “El desprecio a la ficción es consustancial a las mentalidades totalitarias y autoritarias. La ficción como ejercicio de libertad, como práctica de invención, asusta a quienes todo quieren controlarlo, a aquellos para quienes la imaginación debe ‘ajustarse a las necesidades de la revolución’” (75). The literary text that I will approach as *testimonio* is *El material humano* (2009) by Rodrigo Rey Rosa, while with respect to visual media, I will explore the film *Voces inocentes* (2005) by Luis Mandoki.

Memory does not only focus on trauma or torture, it also reflects a normal life. I will focus on how individual and collective memory address factors like life before trauma or war and life afterwards in contemporary Central American narratives that can be approached as *testimonio* and how, reading *testimonio* was not only about individual memory or a narrator speaking on behalf of a community but about several people of a community collectively recreating a past event. This chapter is thus divided into three main sections: heterogeneous and collective memory; the relation of the past with the present; and memory in neoliberal times. I

⁴⁶ “Fiction, by definition, is distinct from fact. Presumably, it is the product of imagination—invention—and it claims the freedom to dispense with ‘what really happened,’ or where it really happened, or when it really happened, and nothing in it needs to be publicly verifiable, although much in it can be verified” (71-72).

will compare them to classic *testimonios* and show the presence of a narrative of life before and after trauma both in the past and in the present. I will also explore themes such as trauma, torture, and suspense that people remember and express through memory. I will analyze narratives regarded as *testimonio* by earlier critics and give examples from *Miguel Mármol* and *Operación masacre* in order to compare them with contemporary fiction and films.

4.3 Heterogeneous and Collective Memory

This section looks at both classic *testimonio* and present-day works of fiction in which memory is a principal element of the narrative, to discuss struggle and resistance to oppression as well as state violence. I argue that both narratives (classic and contemporary) represent life before trauma in a varied manner. However, traditional approaches to *testimonio* tend to emphasize the claims of an individual memory to stand for the story of an entire community. Beverley states: “The narrator in *testimonio* ... speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group, approximating in this way the symbolic function of the epic hero, without at the same time assuming his hierarchical and patriarchal status” (“The Margin at the Center” 27). Such a definition restricts a reader’s approach to the testimonial text.

Classic testimonial narratives are more diverse than such an approach suggests. Indeed, Sklodowska considers *testimonio* to be an open text which can be approached from different disciplines.⁴⁷ While a text like *Miguel Mármol* narrates a story from the perspective of an individual narrator Mármol, *Operación masacre* has several narrators. On the other hand, Elena Poniatowska’s *La noche de Tlatelolco* reproduces a multitude of voices and viewpoints about (in this case) Mexico’s Tlatelolco massacre, and Claribel Alegría’s *No me agarran viva* goes a step

⁴⁷ “By virtue of its hybridity, *testimonio* has invited approaches from literary criticism, anthropology, oral history, philosophy, and political science, and in many ways it continues to be an open text that can be read according to different paradigms” (“The Poetics of Remembering” 254).

further with several narrators collectively re-creating the experience of a protagonist who died fighting the (Salvadoran) army. Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School* was written about the Argentine dirty war after Partnoy arrived in the United States. In this chapter, I include a reading of *Operación masacre*, even though it comes from Argentina, in order to suggest some of the ways in which the argument of this thesis goes beyond Central America and is relevant to the Latin American testimonial genre in general.

Testimonial narratives were diverse, and losing sight of the tension between individual and collective memory confines our reading of *testimonio*. It also leads us to focus more on similarities within and across texts, which can construct the image of a homogenous past, passing over conflicting ideas about collective struggle and ideology. Such homogenization eventually brings stagnation and indifference in approaches to *testimonio* and in understanding the complexity of the past. While this restriction helps to communicate the dominant factors in the narrative, such as resistance, struggle, oppression, solidarity, and violence,⁴⁸ it suppresses other factors like traumatic affects and a normal life before it, as also the elements of suspense and mystery that are also present in testimonial narratives. I have sub-divided this section according to the features that classic and contemporary *testimonios* share: life before the violence, life after the violence, and mystery. These features will help us see the diversity of narratives in both contemporary fiction from Central America and in the classic texts read as *testimonio*.

4.3.1 *Life before Trauma*

Memory that is related to traumatic events distinguishes between life before and after such trauma. Memories of the civil war in Central America establish, first, that before the trauma that

⁴⁸ Beverley adds: "Testimonio represents an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalisation, oppression, and struggle" (35).

they describe, people had a regular life filled with everyday worries, happiness, excitement, and so on. Recalling such unremarkable memories helps to establish a comparison, whereby the contrast between recollections of life before the trauma and the state of things in trauma's wake both highlights the impact of the trauma and violence on the victim's life and also explains the reaction of the victim and his or her family to that traumatic event. Argenti and Schramm cite "Radstone and Hodgkin's model of memory" for which "a strategic understanding of memory [is that] in which forgetting and remembering are not individual pathologies, but collective processes of representation and identity formation" (14). In a traumatic event, "collective processes of representation and identity formation" arise both in the life of the victims who experienced the violence and also for the perpetrators of the violence. Hence, we see that identity formation or collective representation can differ in Central America on the basis of the narrator describing the past from his or her personal experience. Argenti and Schramm further argue that "a model premised on traumatic silence perversely exculpates perpetrators of violence from responsibility for their crimes" (14). Thus, memory of violence or traumatic memories should be narrated in their varied forms to understand the heterogeneity of the past.

There is a difference in the present and in the past readings of *testimonio*. The present is at least notionally free from civil war; the issues are distinct from the time when so much of Latin America was under authoritarian rule. Yet, contemporary fiction and film from Central America returns to past events through memory to understand the present situation; such texts compare the past with the present so that they can analyse the present based on the past or the past based on the present. But this comparison has long been a feature of testimonial texts, which always featured everyday memories alongside traumatic recollections. In this section, I explore *Miguel Mármol* as it describes the oppression and struggle before and during the social uprising

of the 1930s and its violent repression, and depicts Mármol and his community's life before trauma struck them. On the other hand, *Operación masacre*, which has multiple narrators, describes repression in 1950s Argentina and various individual narratives collectively evoke life before the trauma. Further, Mackenbach notes of the role of individual memories that "en el caso de Centroamérica, esta producción textual ... ha llevado el llamado "giro subjetivo" a un extremo, resaltando la individualidad de esas memorias Ya no es un Yo que pretende ser el sujeto representativo de todo un colectivo, sino que insiste en su individualidad" (240). This makes us consider why there was a need to change the track from that "I" representing an entire community to an "I" that only wants to tell her/his specific story in Central American literature. Does it mean that these authors noticed the complexity between individual and collective memory? Does it also mean that they understood that testimonial narratives are now being perceived as homogenized stories?

Roque Dalton's *Miguel Mármol* (1982) consists of a conversation between two revolutionaries: Mármol, a former cobbler and communist activist, and Dalton, the poet and militant in the FMLN guerrilla. The book's narrative strategy is very similar to that of other classic *testimonios* like that of Domitila Barrios de Chungara, where the story revolves around organizing a union to fight oppression. Mármol begins by recounting his life since birth, for instance, his relationship with his mother and his sisters. We observe the normality of his life in the initial pages when he tells us about his family, when he was born, how he was brought up, and the hardship that his mother went through to maintain the family but also the everyday activities typical of such a childhood: "Desde luego, yo en esos momentos no me daba cuenta de nada y me pasaba el tiempo cazando lagartijas en los escobillales que rodeaban nuestra pobre casa, apenas preocupado cuando no había que comer y apretaba hambre" (10). He relates his

individual memory to the collective memory of his community: “Sin embargo, recuerdo que me daban mucha lástima los campesinos andrajosos que llegaban a buscar inútilmente trabajo al pueblo o las filas de enfermos que venían de oriente para tratar de ingresar en el hospital de San Salvador” (10). Thus, he describes his innocence as a child who was not yet aware of poverty at home and the difficulties the mother faced to obtain food for her kids. He remembers that the community around him struggled similarly to survive. This illustration helps us to connect individual to collective memory and it helps us to observe that the narrative is more about becoming conscious about one’s position in society. Another point at which we notice the interruption of a regular life in his early childhood is when Mármol talks about how the people in his hometown of Ilopango celebrated Christmas and adds: “Toda aquella forma de vida se iba a destruir más tarde con la construcción del Aeropuerto Internacional y la instalación de la aviación militar en los terrenos de Ilopango. El aeropuerto y el cuartel de la aviación mataron a Ilopango y trajeron la corrupción y los odios” (29). The comparison between two forms of memory--everyday and traumatic--is established.

Throughout, Mármol also extrapolates from individual to community memory so as to construct an image of poverty in El Salvador as a whole, thus expanding the narrative’s horizon to the national level and the number of people suffering in the country: “La situación en todo el país era de una miseria terrible, agravada con la reciente gran ruina de 1917, que destruyó San Salvador y mató a mucha gente. Otra calamidad era que ya se había entronizado en el poder la maldita dinastía de los Meléndez-Quiñónez” (37). *Miguel Mármol* can therefore be read as a history of El Salvador, a history that links individual, collective, and national memory, to show that “memory and history are not opposed but ‘entangled’” (7).⁴⁹ Margaret Randall pursues this

⁴⁹Argenti and Schramm cite Pierre Nora’s view on memory and history.

thread that Mármol establishes when she claims that, through *Miguel Mármol* “people retrieved their history, a collective memory so long denied, and it became an important part of their identity of struggle” (*Walking to the Edge* 107). Thus, the text provides an alternative voice of the past than the official account, and another version of national history.

Rodolfo Walsh’s *Operación masacre* is situated in Argentina under the post-Peronist dictatorial regime of the 1950s and tells the story of a massacre that the government committed against its citizens; it also demonstrates the government’s carelessness. Though *Operación masacre* is situated in Argentina and comes from a specific historical context that is different from most of the texts discussed here, my aim in this chapter, and in this dissertation as a whole, is to provide an alternative approach not just to Central American testimonial narratives but to the Latin American testimonial genre as a whole. Moreover, many critics point out that that this is (in Beasley-Murray’s words) “arguably the very first Latin American *testimonio*” (267), which therefore helps to set the template for what will come later. At the same time, Walsh’s book also offers a useful counterpoint to Mármol’s narrative, not least because it is immediately collective in a way that the Salvadoran’s story is not. *Operación masacre* revolves around a group of working-class men who are rounded up by the police in the context of a rebellion in which few if any of them were involved, and then taken to be shot. But some survive and later narrate their experience to Walsh. In this narrative, life before the traumatic event is well distinguished from life after the trauma. The key to the distinction lies in the diverse voices from the past which the narrator collects; this story is distinct from *Miguel Mármol* as it includes interviews and information gathered from various sources: “El valor de *Operación masacre* radica en que abre una discusión importante sobre los límites entre ficción y documento, entre literatura e historia, entre novela y testimonio” (Franken Osorio, “Melodrama y testimonio” 82). Here, the relation

between history, *testimonio*, and literature has memory as the common element when we attempt to revisit the past. The moment we divide them, we lose that complexity and we bring a more rigid and fixed notion of the past to the present or, as Jean Franco mentions in the Foreword to Nelly Richard's *Cultural Residues*, "what happened to the remnants of the militant and the democratic Left in the postdictatorship? Returning from exile or emerging from clandestinity, they found themselves in a different world. Older systems of meaning were eroded, and old loyalties and principles had become irrelevant" (viii). Memory allows us to relate and link these disciplines and at the same time connect the past to the present.

Walsh's text begins with the individual, everyday routines of the victims before the trauma struck them and changed their lives thereafter. The narrator gives a brief description of each person and his family and the kind of life he was living before the arrest so that the reader understands the effect of the traumatic events in the victims' lives. This also helps the readers analyze the damage that the state did to the victims and their families and their present condition. For example, Walsh describes one of the victims as follows: "Nicolás Carranza no era un hombre feliz, esa noche del 9 de junio de 1956. Al amparo de las sombras acababa de entrar en su casa, y es posible que algo lo mordiera por dentro. Nunca lo sabremos del todo. Muchos pensamientos duros el hombre se lleva a la tumba Era peronista Nicolás Carranza. Y estaba prófugo" (29-30). He adds that Carranza has six children, notes their ages, and details his activity before he was taken away and killed. On the other hand, Garibotti, Carranza's friend and another victim, is described as: "alto, musculoso, cara cuadrada y enérgica, de ojos un poco hostiles, bigote fino que rebase ampliamente las comisuras de los labios" (32). He tries to keep out of any trouble or arguments: "Francisco Garibotti no quiera meterse en líos. Sabe que las cosas andan mal en el gremio—interventores militares y compañeros presos—, pero todo pasará algún día. Hay que

tener paciencia y esperar” (33). This description demonstrates that Garibotti was aware of the restlessness in the country and the conflict between different ideologies, though he was not part of it, and was hopeful that with patience, the country could overcome this tension.

There were other victims whose life changed after this event and the detailed description of their life from before demonstrates that trauma, violence and torture were not part of their lives earlier. They had a regular life before the torture despite their political involvement. For instance, we note that Carranza was a Peronist and so was always on the run, but Garibotti was not. This description of the individual and his unique story not only tells us about the heterogeneity of the past to which we can have access through memory, but at the same time warns us that we still will not know everything, something will still be missing in our understanding of the past. Nelly Richard states how stories from memory should be read in the present time: “Perhaps the unofficial fragments of the most entangled narratives are the ones we must reread with an eye to the hidden, so that memory and remembrance confess the muddle of their guilt, torment, and obscenity” (31). Thus, this story focuses on a violent event committed by the state heedless of its victims’ ideologies. In that way one realizes that one can be a victim of the state despite being innocent and having never gone against the government.

This story’s narrative strategy is distinct from that of *Miguel Mármol*. In fact, María Angélica Franken Osorio describes *Operación masacre* as: “un testimonio no precisamente épico, sino más bien una contracara antiheroica y sentimental del testimonio más tradicional” (“Melodrama y testimonio” 85). It focuses on various individual memories to narrate life before trauma and collectively reflects on the social situation of Argentina. Like *Miguel Mármol*, it also provides a historical account (now, of Argentina) that was previously suppressed. Thus, we observe that the role of memory is diverse. The presence of an ordinary daily life before the

arrival of a violent rupture can be found in testimonial texts which helps us understand the victims' pain and loss after the trauma. Yet, it is absent in our discussion when we tend to focus on these themes. There is a need to re-emphasize life before trauma or violence and see how it affected the present of the individual and the collective in the testimonial genre. A failure to identify the role of memory at various levels (including individual memories, life before the trauma, the traumatic event, the life after and its consequence in the present) weakens the reading of texts as *testimonio*, understating their complexity both in history and in identity formation. For history and identity formation in a country affected by violence is neither singular nor homogenous. On the other hand, taking account of the complex character of memory will strengthen not only the relationship between life before the trauma and after but can also be useful in analyzing life in Central America today.

4.3.2 *Trauma and Suffering*

After the description of ordinary life, these narratives turn to the point at which that normality was disrupted by traumatic events. The violence that the community sees and experiences changes its daily life forever. Latin America's classic *testimonios* principally focus on the effect of state violence, and on the people who resisted that oppression and raised their voice against it. These texts in different ways address issues related to the physical and mental abuses that people suffer in a community. Rosalind Shaw defines trauma in terms of narrative's limits: "unable to narrativize (and therefore integrate) the traumatic event, victims undergo a dissociative splitting, simultaneously inhabiting the past and the present as two incommensurable realities and pass on their psychosocial wounds to their children" (255). She adds that such a reaction is common among victims of torture and genocide, and where "silence is pathologised, while narrative remembering constitutes the only 'normal,' 'healthy' form of memory" (255). Classic *testimonio*

describes such trauma and suffering in varied ways. We will see how *Miguel Mármol* depicts events in El Salvador and similar trauma is described in *Operación masacre* in Argentina.

In the case of *Miguel Mármol*, both the story and narration emphasize bravery. In other words, Mármol narrates the torture he suffers—particularly an incident when he was almost killed—with courage, as opposed to vulnerability (in the face of death). He comes across not as a victim who undergoes “a dissociative splitting, simultaneously inhabiting the past and the present as two incommensurable realities”; rather, he states very clearly that this was his past and he survived it, though he needed time to recover to join the movement again.⁵⁰ His strength and his ongoing determination to fight injustice are more important than how he dealt with torture or survived a firing squad. For Michael Sprinker, “Toughness, both physical and mental, are apparent in his every word” (“*Miguel Mármol, Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village, and: The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey* [Review]” 216). Margaret Randall describes *Miguel Mármol* as “a book that is high adventure as well as history, political analysis, and the poignant first-person account of one man who—like hundreds of thousands all over the so-called Third World—have committed their last breath to their people’s liberation” (*Walking to the Edge* 108). She hopes that someday his story might be turned into a visual narrative, a Hollywood film that would be “about the man who crawled out from under his executed comrades, donned his best friend’s ‘brand new tan hat,’ and fled to a hiding place from which he would continue to fight” (108). Nouns such as “toughness,” “adventure,” and the “fight” against injustice are key features of this text and contribute to an idealization of Mármol.

However, in the description of his arrest, shooting, and subsequent escape, Mármol also mentions his fear when night approached, as the killings were done at night: “Cuando llegó la

⁵⁰ On one occasion, Mármol tells Dalton: “No me arrepentí, a pesar de que todos estos movimientos me hacían doler tremendamente las heridas, sobre todo las de las manos y los brazos” (202).

noche la desmoralización era tremenda y hasta yo mismo comencé a sentir que las fuerzas morales me flaqueaban. Era nítido el sentimiento colectivo de la proximidad de la muerte” (197). Here, closeness to death, uncertainty, and therefore the terror of the environment, are very prominent. As with the text’s description of life before trauma, now the experience of dealing with the trauma constitutes a connection between individual memory and the community. Of his time in jail, he describes the torture he suffered: “Los policías me desnudaron, me descalzaron y me hicieron sentar en el sillón metálico. El interrogatorio continuó allí, pero en un tono grosero y burlón” (194). He further describes how “Unos policías grandotes terminaron de amarrarnos por los brazos con cuerdas fuertes y tan apretadamente que comencé a sentir como si la sangre se me quisiera salir por la boca. El cuerpo me comenzó a temblar” (199). It is here that he connects his individual suffering with that of the country: “Efectivamente, al día siguiente se produjo en San Salvador uno de los crímenes más negros cometidos por la oligarquía criolla y sus gobiernos: la gran masacre de mujeres molinistas en el centro mismo de la capital” (59). Mármol adds: “Un sentimiento de impotencia nos invadía a los molinistas y los más radicales comenzamos a pensar que la actividad política de gritar ‘Viva Molina’ y repartir hojas sueltas era una perfecta mierda cuando el enemigo tenía los fusiles y las ametralladoras y todo el ejército” (60). The massacre takes place not only at the level of Mármol’s individual experience but also throughout the country. Torture and violence lead him to identify with a group of people and in this case, develop a solidarity with both the working people and the revolutionary party.

There is a life after torture, too, evident in Mármol’s narration. For instance, he refuses to remember or revisit the ways in which he was cured: “Cierto es que no quiero ni acordarme de las curaciones que me hacía en el pecho desgarrado y putrefacto, a base de tintura de yodo y alcohol, pero la verdad es que tuve conmigo mano de santa” (210). His physical injuries are

described when the authorities are searching for him and the army puts out a bulletin in which “Me describían con un ojo de menos y desfigurado por las terribles heridas en el rostro” (205). Argenti and Schramm cite van der Kolk and Van der Hart to argue that “familiar and expectable experiences are automatically assimilated without much conscious awareness, but frightening experiences may not fit in with one’s cognitive schemata. The memories of these experiences are then stored differently and are not available for retrieval under normal circumstances” (9). Thus, Mármol’s resistance to expressing traumatic affects of recovering clearly shows that “under normal circumstances” it is not easy for the victim to relive memories of pain.

Mármol also invokes the condition of the country after the 1932 massacre. There was poverty, food was scarce, and the poor became poorer while the rich became richer: “la gente pobre hecha una miseria, durmiendo en las calles, enfermos y hambrientos; amenazados y amenazando con la peste; los comerciantes haciendo su agosto, pescando en río revuelto; y los ricos muy bien, en sus buenas casas que nunca se caen con los terremotos, asistiendo a los oficios religiosos a dar su queja a Dios porque no nos mató de una vez a todos” (214). This example indicates how badly the country was affected by the massacre. Though, on the one hand, there was hunger and misery everywhere, but on the other, life looked perfectly normal for the rich people. He also describes his country as a “cementerio de pobres” (215). Barbara Harlow states that: “For Mármol himself, 1932 remains the point of departure and continues as the central moment of his historical narrative” (“Testimonio and Survival” 76). Shaw describes how “the memories of the past violence shape the ways in which people experience, enact and respond to subsequent violence, violent events are themselves mediated by memory” (“Afterword” 253). The 1932 massacre deeply affected the Salvadoran people, as Harlow recalls Mármol’s comment that: “Después de ese maldito año todos somos hombres diferentes y creo

que a partir de ese momento El Salvador es un país diferente. El Salvador es hoy, antes que nada, una creación de esa barbarie” (76). In Guatemala, much the same is true of the CIA-backed coup of 1954, as Caso notes when she discusses the difficulty for the people to construct the idea of a nation which has experienced such severe violence: “Written decades later, Arturo Arias’s novel *Después de las bombas* (1979) remembers the events of 1954 and reveals how they impacted the process of engaging with the past for years to come: glaringly blank pages, forced silences, perilous treading through the indisputable danger of words, et cetera” (62). Shaw further mentions that narratives about violence “shape not only experiences of violence but also the way we remember and re-narrate them” (254). Miguel Mármol narrates suffering and torture as something that not only he (the narrator) went through during his fight against injustice and inequality, but also the entire country suffered so much so that it deeply impacted that society and changed people’s perceptions. It created a divide between those who identified as victims and those who (were) identified as perpetrators of the violence, and more broadly, it transformed what it meant to be Salvadoran and Central American.

Where Miguel Mármol connects trauma and its effects to the memory of his country, *Operación masacre* presents all these elements through various narrative voices. In this text, we note that the arrested men are taken to the Regional Unit (“la Unidad Regional,” 75) to undergo interrogation. Though here there is no physical abuse during the interrogation, the detainees are nervous and suspicious of the next move of the army. For instance, one of the men, Livraga, is restless and suspects that his friend Vicente Rodríguez may have betrayed him. Yet another, Gavino, knows very well that the army will not believe what he has to say and he therefore

comes up with a new story.⁵¹ While Miguel Mármol demonstrated his bravery in the face of torture and suffering thanks to his involvement in revolutionary activities, in *Operación masacre* most of the victims are not involved in political activities and manifest the fear that they experience in front of the army. As the text describes the scenario: “La atmósfera se hace cada vez más pesada entre los detenidos, una cosa es ya evidente: no piensan soltarlos” (82). This atmosphere is tense till the very end when they are taken to be shot. For example, when they are taken to the spot where they are to be shot one of the victims asks “¿Qué nos van a hacer?” to which he gets the response: “No tengan miedo ... no les vamos a hacer nada” (91). All this is very different than *Miguel Mármol* in the sense that the victims are not ready to die as Mármol is all the time. The hope that maybe they will survive is there in the victims even before they were shot. However, there are similarities too, especially at the time when the victims were vulnerable about their situation. We could relate it with Mármol’s nocturnal worries, as they wait for the army to choose who will be tortured or killed. The uncertainty of their situation or their life before the army that night is another characteristic of the victims’ trauma. However, from the reader’s perspective this ambivalence can also be read as suspense or thrill. Individual memory can therefore provoke various emotions about the past in the reader.

It is equally important for us to learn about life after trauma in so far as it affects not just the victims but also their families. Henry James Morello states: “Posttraumatic culture is defined as a culture which is produced as a response to a trauma and whose stylistic features mirror symptoms found in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)” (“Two Traumas One Aesthetic” 2). Their lives were then completely changed, and for no good reason or no fault of their own. In the

⁵¹ “Gavino sabe perfectamente que no le van a creer si dice él también estaba por casualidad en el departamento de Torres. Busca alguien que lo secunde. Se pone de acuerdo con Carranza. Y ambos declaran que son simpatizantes peronistas, que presumían el estallido del motín y fueron a escuchar la noticia por radio” (80).

case of *Operación masacre* the immediate effect of the shooting is described: “Horacio di Chiano no se mueve. Está tendido de boca, los brazos flexionados a los flancos, las manos apoyadas en el suelo a la altura de los hombros Su cuerpo es territorio del miedo que le penetra hasta los huesos: todos los tejidos saturados de miedo, en cada célula la gota pesada del miedo” (95). Di Chiano does not remember how long he laid there like that. Morello notes: “The avoidance of thinking or speaking about the horrific events leads to a variety of problems in individuals and societies. One of the gravest dangers of avoidance at a societal level is the imposition of false memories” (5). Walsh continues: “¿Cuánto tiempo hace que está así, como muerto? Ya no lo sabe. No lo sabrá nunca” (95).

With memory, one cannot be certain about past events, while by contrast the discipline of History tries to trace the past in all its minute details. Richard states: “Between memory and history, there is a difficult meshing of signs that deal with the critical operation of memory production. Woven into the diffuse folds of twisted meanings, this tangle of signs escapes from the principal narrative toward secondary narrations” (31). In the case of *Operación masacre*, the effects of the trauma are borne by its victims for the rest of their lives. For instance, one of the victims who escapes the massacre is so traumatised that he starts apologizing for escaping.⁵² Another, Livraga, “había bajado diez kilos, los vendajes le borran la cara” (122-123). The victims carry with them the mark of the massacre throughout their lives; life after trauma becomes different from life before. The narrator states: “Livraga desfigurado a tiros; Giunta casi enloquecido; Di Chiano escondido en un sótano; a los otros, desterrados” (221).

⁵² “Giunta estaba tan descentrado, a esa altura de las cosas, que trató de disculparse por haber huido. Explico que había sido una reacción instintiva, esa de escapar a la muerte; que en realidad, él no había querido Sí, no había querido ofenderlos” (111).

Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer elaborate on critic Shoshana Felman's description of a Holocaust survivor: "Felman sees him as a terrified, retraumatized witness—one who, in the courtroom and in the encounter with Eichmann, returns to the 'other planet' and relives his horrific experiences there before the eyes of the world, collapsing the distance between present and past, between 'here' and 'over there'" ("The Witness in the Archive" 154). Without discounting the differences between the Holocaust and violence in Argentina, we can see that the reaction to violence is similar. Thus in *Operación masacre* we see a victim that "collapses the distance between the past and present" in the case of Giunta, of whom the narrator says: "uno tiene la sensación de estar viendo una película que, desde que se rodó aquella noche, gira y gira dentro de su cabeza, sin poder parar nunca. Están todos los detallecitos, las caras, los focos, el campo, los menudos ruidos, el frío y el calor, la escapada entre las latas, y el olor a pólvora y a pánico, ... como es seguro que empieza dentro de su cabeza ese continuado eterno" (22). The memory of this traumatic event is then repressed not only by the individuals who survive it but also by the country as a whole until Walsh decides to unearth it, by means of his *testimonio*. Let us recall Billig's observation that "Freud's interest lay in those unconscious beliefs which, he claimed, 'cannot become conscious' because 'a certain force opposes them.' These beliefs are so shocking or painful that something stops them from making the journey" (16). I therefore ask if that "certain force" only operates in our mind which represses such traumatic events "from making the journey" from the unconscious to the conscious? Or whether that force can also be the State which equally takes part in silencing and sometimes even disappearing such incidents from the memory of the country (thus "repressing" evidence "from making the journey" from the individual to the nation)? However, even if a memory is repressed by external or internal forces, it makes its presence felt in other ways—like the scars on the body, the madness, the hiding, and

exile—which refuse to leave both the mind and the country completely. These classic *testimonios* narrate stories about common men who led regular lives like others in a country until an untoward incident changed their life completely.

4.3.3 *Memory and Mystery*

We have seen that documenting the contrast between life before and after trauma and suffering, structures classic *testimonios*; however, we ignore another, more literary, element—mystery and suspense. Too often, such elements are not considered as part of the narrative. Memory is a tool to narrate stories about the past—ordinary lives and everyday customs, the traumatic intervention of a violent event, and its consequences. However, the relationship between these elements is often related in terms of mystery, suspense, and even a kind of thrill—literary features that suffuse texts regarded as *testimonio*. Mystery is not only present in contemporary Central American fiction read as *testimonio* but also in the testimonial genre as a whole. I will continue with my discussion of two classic testimonial texts—*Operación masacre* and *Miguel Mármol*—that use such literary tools to narrate tales of memory.

Rodolfo Walsh's *Operación masacre* is narrated in the third person by a narrator who introduces the protagonists, residing in different parts of the capital city, Buenos Aires, and their daily routine. In some ways, the text seems to connect more to detective novels than to the testimonial genre that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. The narrator gradually reveals details about the survivors, but not all at once; as each new protagonist is introduced, the sense of suspense rises. For example, the narrator says in the prologue how he realized that there were more survivors of this massacre, which he was not aware of earlier when he interviewed Giunta, the first survivor he meets: “A último momento Giunta se acuerda de una creencia que él tiene, no de algo que sabe, sino de algo que ha imaginado o que oyó murmurar, y es que hay un tercer

hombre que se salvó” (22). Franken Osorio notes that “La presencia de una intriga policial que se construye en torno a la interrogante ... mantiene el suspenso dentro del relato” (83). This shows the use of suspense and mystery to unfold the narrative plot from the past through memory in *testimonios*. In other words, narrative tales read as *testimonio* use literary devices to share their stories with the rest of the world.

The text draws inspiration from the suspense genre to develop its plot and relate a story from the past about an injustice committed by the state against its own citizens. For Franken Osorio, “lo interesante es que este verosímil testimonial se mezcla con otros de carácter ficcional, como son los del género policial y melodramático” (89). The book begins, like the detective genre, by depicting the narrator is engaged in different occupations to earn a living and is not bothered about the political unrest in Argentina. This opening is very common in detective novels when the reader is introduced to the plot by a detective who claims to lead a somewhat boring life before the case comes to him. In the case of Walsh’s narrator, this disinterest is expressed in terms of a willed amnesia: “Después no quiero recordar más, ni la voz del locutor en la madrugada anunciando que dieciocho civiles han sido ejecutados en Lanús, ni la ola de sangre que anega al país hasta la muerte de Valle. Tengo demasiado para una sola noche. Valle no me interesa. Perón no me interesa, la revolución no me interesa. ¿Puedo volver al ajedrez?” (18). And later, he says: “No sé qué es lo que consigue atraerme en esa historia difusa, lejana, erizada de improbabilidades. No sé por qué pido hablar con ese hombre, por qué estoy hablando con Juan Carlos Livraga” (19). Such an introduction builds interest in the narrative as the reader is drawn, like the narrator, into the adventure that is to follow.

The book centers on interviews with those who escaped their would-be execution, but (again) the text does not reveal them all at once in the beginning. Rather, information is with-

held and only shared as the plot unfolds. Therefore, the survivors' narrative is more than some simple transcription of a past injustice; it adds factors such as adventure and thrill. The narrative keeps its readers focused until the very end of the story with the help of suspense even as, unlike most detective novels, here we know from the very beginning that the protagonists of this story have escaped the execution. The suspense revolves around "how" they escaped. This text read as *testimonio* (as unlike the suspense genre, it reveals that the protagonists are alive, and it also proves that *testimonio* has literary elements as argued otherwise) therefore creates an environment of thrill and mystery from the start and continues almost till the end of the story, when the victims escape the massacre. The description of the tense situation in which these victims find themselves, their suspicion and doubts about what is going to happen to them and the way they escape death, contain thrill, suspense and mystery. Narratives about the repressed past told through memory are not only about trauma and suffering; or rather, perhaps it is only by recourse to literary models that the repression can be (temporarily) broken or suspended.

With *Miguel Mármol*, testimonial elements are also spiced with suspense and thrill as a part of memory that brings back the torture and suffering of the past. An exemplary incident is the narration of Mármol's escape from an attempted execution. The thrill of his escape is comparable to the narrative strategy of Walsh's text. The narrator sets the scene: "La Luna brillaba en el cielo, pero los árboles hacían que el lugar permaneciera oculto en la oscurana Los faros del camión iluminaban la escena. Quince policías se formaron en pelotón de fusilamiento, mientras los otros dos y el chofer y el jefe nos apuntaban a nosotros. El jefe dio la voz de: 'Preparen, apunten y fuego' casi de una sola vez" (200). He engages the reader and develops a sense of suspense as we become eager to know how he escaped. Mármol says: "sentí varios golpes en el cuerpo y un como timbrazo, un como golpe eléctrico en toda la cabeza.

Después vi una luz intensa y perdí el sentido. Al despertar estaba de bruces, manando sangre de la cabeza” (201). Mármol tells us that he was shot, but the very fact that he is telling the tale assures that he did not die. He recounts hearing the voices of soldiers as they left the scene, but how, suddenly, two of them want to confirm whether all their victims are dead. They shoot several injured revolutionaries whom they find to be still alive before coming to where Mármol is: “Un policía me iba a tirar a mí, oí como el cerrojo del fusil corto el cartucho, pero el otro le dijo: ‘eso es gastar pólvora en zopes, ¿no ves que tiene los sesos de fuera? Lo que podemos ver es si tiene dinero’” (202). This description of his escape is built through suspense. What intrigues the readers is not only to know how he escaped, but also to experience that escape. Mármol’s narration makes the reader relive the adventure and thrill along with the violence, pain, and suffering of watching one’s friends and colleagues die. We notice that in *testimonio* the suspense concerns not whether the protagonist survives, so much as *how* he (or she) does so. In the mystery genre, the narrator involves the readers in the plot by creating suspense around a secret that is only revealed or resolved at the story’s end. *Testimonios*, by contrast, reveal the end of the story, and accordingly it is the journey that becomes more important.

Characteristics such as life before, during, and after trauma, violent confrontation, suffering, suspense, and thrill are part of stories told through memory. As we have seen, the narratives in these classic *testimonios* are diverse. On the one hand, if *Miguel Mármol* is about one individual’s memory related to the history of his country, it is also about revolution and the political training that Mármol acquires, about bravery and courage, and about the thrill of his escape from persecution. *Operación masacre*, on the other hand, weaves various individual narratives together sharing their experience of an execution of innocent people carried out by the Argentine authorities; it is about the nervousness, suspicion, and anxiety that the victims feel in

the process. It is about violence directed at innocent people who do not belong to any political party or support any political idea, and invokes suspense, thrill, and adventure not only in the way it is structured but also in the description of how some would-be victims escaped execution. Thus, memory, which is a central theme of classic *testimonio*, does not only recall resistance or solidarity through its narratives: memory is heterogenous and can bring back other aspects of the story as well. As Ortiz Wallner states:

el escenario de una memoria que constantemente está construyéndose, constituyéndose, no solamente fijan la persistencia de injusticias y de las experiencias traumáticas en las sociedades de una Centroamérica fisurada, sino que sobre todo muestran el proceso activo y dinámico que le es inherente a la literatura como depósito dinámico de saberes sobre la vida en sus múltiples capacidades de ofrecer determinadas formas de vida y de conducta, sobre las posibilidades de reclamar y hacer justicia a través de la escritura.

(165)

Further, the “memoria crítica” that Richard invokes helps us re-think the past by revealing its complexity and by challenging the homogeneous tales imposed by the market and the State to break the connection between the past and the present. Classic *testimonio*, therefore, contains such unexplored elements as a “depósito dinámico de saberes sobre la vida” which can help to keep *testimonio* as a reading strategy alive in the present day, so it can serve to “reclamar y hacer justicia a través de la escritura.”

4.4 The Relationship between Past and Present

The analysis of the relation between collective and heterogeneous memory leads us to the discussion of the present situation in Central America and see whether the past can be connected to the present. We have seen that *testimonio* offers diverse narratives about the past, and it is our

approach that restricts its potential. Reading these texts and films as *testimonios* will not only help to revive this technique, which is considered to have died with the end of the Civil War but will also bring forth the issues that the testimonial reading ignored in the 1980s and 1990s. For instance, we have seen that narratives from memory, when read as *testimonio*, bring forth heterogenous stories from the past that have been suppressed in the official history of that country, makes the past relatable to the present and does away with the boredom imposed on the past. Boredom and stagnancy are tools of the neoliberal society to break the connection between the past and the present; however, “memoria crítica” and “crítica de la memoria,” as discussed by Richard, subvert this idea of neoliberalism and attempt to bring out those unheard stories from the past which can help us understand the present in a better way. These works and films from Central America are tools to rid the past of that stagnancy as not only do they relate the past with the present but also challenge official “memory” and bring to their readers and viewers incidents, events and stories that were silenced. As Oscar Somoza puts it, contemporary Latin American cinema “propone el reconocimiento de los olvidados y desposeídos, de la gente que tradicionalmente no ha tenido voz” (*Ecos de la memoria* 25).

In contemporary fiction and film, the role of memory before the trauma is equally important, but the distinction between life before and after the violence or trauma has declined. Memory shows a continuity with earlier issues (like violence, chaos, or danger in Central American societies today) but with the end of civil war and signing of peace agreements these texts also explore new issues and worries. Ortiz Wallner cites Horacio Castellanos Moya, according to whom post-war Central American literature should have two aims: on the one hand, “inventar el rostro del ‘otro’ salvadoreño, ése que es algo más que un guerrillero o soldado, ese ser envuelto en las pasiones y esperanzas que moldean al ser humano desde siempre,” and on the

other, “ayudar a ‘preservar la memoria,’ a que la nación no olvide sus taras, esa irracionalidad que nos condujo a la conflagración” (*El arte de ficcionar* 134). Castellanos Moya affirms in the case of El Salvador that “La transición política salvadoreña es un proceso relativamente frágil, por lo mismo sujeto a presiones que buscan su reversibilidad o desnaturalización” (*Recuento de incertidumbre* 13). But when Ortiz Wallner turns to the situation in Guatemalan literature she cites Dante Liano: “una de las contribuciones más importantes de la literatura contemporánea guatemalteca ha sido el de escrudiñar el fenómeno de la violencia, no sólo en sus manifestaciones más evidentes sino también en sus causas más ocultas” (“Escrituras de sobrevivencia” 75). Comparing post-war El Salvador and Guatemala, we see that the role of memory is diverse. In El Salvador, memory is invoked to understand the fragility of the country’s political transition and create a more complex narrative; on the other hand, for Liano memory is a tool to explore the deep-seated roots of Guatemala’s ongoing violence.

Contemporary stories also discuss post-war issues with the help of individual and collective memories. They have a main narrator who begins to tell us a story about her/his life but gradually links it with the current problems the Central American society faces, thus relating individual memory with the collective. For example, in *El material humano*, the narrator introduces his interest in investigating the past in the archives but gradually, other voices appear that interfere with his narrative not just to raise issues in the present but also about the diverse past. However, unlike earlier testimonial texts, these voices are not necessarily always of people narrating their stories but other kinds of sources as well, such as diary entries, newspaper articles or letters. In *Voces inocentes*, we are introduced to the war-torn village through Chava, but later, as the story unfolds, other characters enter the picture and whose narrative contributes towards presenting a collective voice of the village.

The relation between memory and mystery is also present in these texts, though their plots do not involve jail or shootouts, but nightmares that add suspense and thrill. We will, therefore, see that contemporary Central American fiction and film demonstrate a continuity with earlier testimonial readings—they have certain similar characteristics that define them as *testimonio*—but they add new concerns from the present and also destabilize the dichotomy between fiction and *testimonio* or between truth and lies, such as in the epigraph of *El material humano*, where the writer Rodrigo Rey Rosa indicates “Aunque no lo parezca, aunque no quería parecerlo, esta es una obra de ficción.” There is definitely an interest in contemporary narratives about understanding the past—that past which still haunts the present—but which they know is impossible to grasp through a single medium.

4.5 Life Before and After Trauma becomes the Same

The distinction between life before and after trauma has disappeared in contemporary Central American fiction and film. The violence that was part of the trauma and suffering in the earlier days has now reached a new level of normality in today’s Central American society today, and children who grew up during the war are unaware of any other normality. The distinction between a “before” and an “after,” so pertinent for the earlier narratives when heard from an adult’s point of view, now disappears in contemporary stories, whose narrators are unable to reflect on a normal life. The temporality of trauma is complicated in post-civil war accounts, though it is no less important to understand the past and the present of Central America.

4.5.1 El material humano

Rodrigo Rey Rosa’s *El material humano* (2009) is a suspense story whose plot unfolds with the protagonist, also the text’s narrator, investigating what happened to people who were kidnapped

or disappeared by the state. He thinks that recovering their lives and their stories might help in understanding issues that the country once faced in the past: “mi intención original ... había sido investigar los casos de artistas e intelectuales perseguidos, o reclutados, por la policía” (83). This investigation takes place in a present in which civil war and oppression have supposedly ended in Guatemala. Yet the text emphasizes how violence and danger persist, only to be joined by new challenges, particularly post-war repercussions that Guatemala now faces.

On the one hand, the story reflects on the present chaotic situation of Guatemala—through the narrator’s life and his archival investigation—and on the other, it addresses the memory of the past through various sources. Unlike Mármol, who was the principal narrator of his story, here the text is in the form of a diary entry where the protagonist writes down his daily activity. The narrator’s own journey of investigation in the Archive that started off as mere collection of data about important people and what happened to them, becomes increasingly challenging as he continues. He gradually begins to face restrictions and receive threats. These threats and danger are demonstrated through his dreams, nightmares that reflect upon the present chaotic situation in his country. But, Guatemala’s past has a different set of violence and issues too, thus, the protagonist delves into a problematic past and at same time grapples with the complicated present. He relates the present complications of his country to the Archive: “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” (14). The narrator’s continuous movement between the two makes us compare the past with the present, helping us realize the complexity of both, which is often simplified in neoliberal society.

The present is not about civil wars and dictatorial regimes, but *El material humano* questions a life that was easily distinguishable between ‘normal’ and traumatic in the past. This text demonstrates that Guatemala now is more complex as society has accepted violence as a part of regular life, undermining that demarcation between the normal and the traumatic. The book shows people who have become comfortable living with a level of chaos that would once have been unthinkable. The narrator refers to the violence still present in the country very casually, as if such events are now the norm. For example: “Clara no pudo venir a limpiar el apartamento. Me llamó por teléfono para explicar que ayer mataron a otro chofer de la línea de autobuses de Boca del Monte, donde ella vive, y hoy los colegas conductores están en huelga” (170). This casual approach to narrating a bus driver’s death shows that such killings now happen every day, something which people are accustomed to, and to which they are relatively inured in the present time. In another instance, while waiting in the lawyer’s office (“Oficinas de la Procuraduría”), the narrator reads and takes notes from the newspaper: “Banda de policías sospechosos del crimen de diputados salvadoreños tendría al menos 12 integrantes. [. . .] 19 de febrero: encuentros cuerpos quemados y automóvil de diputados salvadoreños para el Parlamento Centroamericano y su chofer” (70). After writing this down he looks at the clock and decides to wait for another fifteen minutes: “Veo el reloj de pared, decido esperar quince minutos más. Sin embargo, pasan los quince minutos y no me levanto” (71). This immobility evidences the narrator’s sense of detachment from the ongoing violence that Guatemalans experience in the post-civil war period. Thus, the possibility of assessing trauma, how one lives with it after and how life is before that event, has altered. There is no longer a peaceable “before” with which to contrast a post-traumatic “after.” Again, memory has to be explored, to reflect on the life during the civil war and its repercussion in the present time. For instance, Richard comments on how the

Chilean transition from dictatorial rule has been promoted as the end of one regime, and the dawn of a new one. But, she argues, it was more of a continuity than “de corte o ruptura” (“Crítica de la memoria” 188). She further adds that the transition in “Chile es re-agenciar transformaciones ya realizadas por la dictadura y su implementación neoliberal de una economía de mercado” (188). In Guatemala, too, the end of the dictatorship and the signing of a peace agreement did not close a phase in history to begin a new one; rather, through memory, we see there is a continuity with earlier problems as well as with the ruling party.

Rey Rosa’s novel argues that the conflicts and issues that the country faced earlier have not gone away; rather they have only attained a new level of commonality. *El material humano*, when read as *testimonio*, challenges not only official narratives that silenced stories from other sources like the documents found in *la isla* (the archive) or the personal diary entries of the narrator’s mother, but at the same time, it also demonstrates that memory is heterogenous, that stories from the past (not only oral narratives, but the archival evidence, personal diary entries and other similar things) should be brought alive in the present so the past can stop haunting the present. These fictional works, as well as earlier narratives read as *testimonio*, make the reader active and inquisitive about the past and its relationship with the present.

4.5.2 *Voces inocentes*

Luis Mandoki’s film *Voces inocentes* (2004), on the other hand, offers a different perspective on the Central American past. *Voces inocentes* portrays the life of a Salvadoran village called Cuscatanzingo that is torn apart in the fight between guerrillas and the army; this was the last town in El Salvador to be freed from war. The film can also be viewed as the *testimonio* of a child named Chava who narrates how he escaped getting killed by the army before finally arriving in the United States. Chava introduces the plot to the viewers, talks about everyday life

in a village caught in the war: how villagers carry on their daily activities, how his mother goes to work and Chava goes to school and plays with his friends. However, gradually, both he and his friends are affected by the violence brought by the war and the film also depicts the tragedy they experience in their village.

Although the movie has a Mexican director and the actors are not from El Salvador, the story is based on the life of Oscar Orlando Torres, who is Salvadoran and also wrote the film's script. In addition, it is a film narrated from the point of view of a child. In *El material humano*, we observed the impact of war in the present from the perspective of an adult and here, we will see how children are affected in the war. Steven Hoelscher argues that "our ability to remember the past is based on a wide range of mnemonic means, including visual images. If those images appear in the form of cinema, television, painting, commercial advertising, sculpture, postcards or web pages" ("Angels of Memory" 196). If we approach the film as a *testimonio*, we are not only expanding the horizon of *testimonio* but subverting the neoliberal practice of reading it. As Grinberg Pla explains the tension between documentary, fiction and memory "los hijos y las hijas de la guerra, en la cual impera una tensión irresuelta entre ficción, documentación, memoria y relato autobiográfico. El ímpetu documental interviene en la ficción, pero sin desmantelarla, del mismo modo que la ficción intercepta la autobiografía [testimonio]. En esta oscilación entre lo ficcional y lo documental-autobiográfico reside la compleja propuesta de recuperación del pasado de filme" ("*Princesas rojas*: La memoria de la lucha sandinista desde la mirada de sus hijas" 58). Thus, *Voces inocentes* describes the repercussions of the war on children who grew up during that time in Central America. This story, therefore, does not demarcate the memory of a life before and after the war like *El material humano*, as neither Chava, the child protagonist, nor the other children who grew up during the war, can remember a life without war; the

distinction between life before and after the violence becomes unrelatable for protagonists in contemporary narratives. Where *El material humano* focuses on the acceptance of violence as part of normality, *Voces inocentes* raises concern for children who grew up in a war-torn country and have no memory of any normal life before the violence struck them.

This demarcation (between life before and after the war) can be seen for instance in the way in which the film's opening scene projects how trauma and normality exist in the village in parallel, as one rainy day Chava and other boys are arrested by the army and taken to be killed. Chava narrates: "Tengo mucha sed. Me duelen los pies. Tengo piedras en mi zapato. Seguro nos van a matar. ¿Por qué nos quieren matar si no hicimos nada?" What follows is a flashback to the time when Chava was leading a "normal" life. On another rainy day, Chava's father left them and went to the United States: "Un día mi papá nos dejó y se fue a los Estados Unidos en medio de la guerra. Mi mamá no vino a despedirse. Me dijo que ahora voy a ser el hombre de la casa." Other examples of normality and violence can be seen in the film when Chava and his sister come back from school, in their fights as siblings, with their younger brother who is still too young to go to school and is being taken care of by the family. The kids stay together and look after each other, especially when their mother goes to work and comes back late at night.

However, periodic firefights between the army and the guerrilla are quite common in the village, and therefore in the first scene we see children moving mattresses to the windows and hiding under beds to escape being hurt by the bullets, showing that the children are used to such violence and can manage themselves without their parents. Once the bullets stop, normality returns the next day in the lives of the villagers. Later in the film, we note that due to the increased conflict between the army and the guerrilla, the mother leaves her job and moves to stay near her own mother. This scene demonstrates that even as the war is going on and people

are dying, there is always a hope of leading a normal life. The children love the new house and play with their friends, as Chava's mother and grandmother watch with smiles on their faces. However, the violence keeps increasing every passing day till the entire village decides to leave.

We have noted a strong connection between individual and collective memory, and we see in this film, too, that it is not only Chava and his family who are affected by the war but the entire village. For example, we notice another young boy (Chava's friend) who is forcefully taken by the army, and one day he meets Chava and his other friends. They are happy to see each other, but the young soldier boasts of his strength and superiority and threatens them with his gun saying:

Cuando llegamos al cuartel éramos más de cuarenta y la mayoría de trece y catorce. Yo era uno de los más chicos, pero aprendí muy rápido porque nuestro instructor era un gringo que había estado en Vietnam. Nos enseñó a disparar y a emboscar. La semana pasada emboscamos a un grupo de guerrilleros... hijos de puta y yo fui el que los apresó con esta. Y ustedes ya mero les toca. Porque están reclutando todos ¿eh? Grandes y chicos.

In another instance we observe a conversation between two adult women—Chava's mother and his grandmother—where the grandmother convinces her daughter to come and stay near her. She tells her daughter, who perhaps still believes that her husband will rescue them some day, “Los que se van para el norte, se marean. Levanta la frente, Kella, que el jodido es él. Los que se van sufren más que los que se quedan y los que se quedan luchan.” This demonstrates that though the women caught in the midst of the war, there is solidarity among them; a bond that strengthens them to face the enemy together. It also suggests that leaving the country during the war does not mean the end of suffering, rather, it has become a part of the life of a Central American

irrespective of their location—either inside El Salvador or outside, one’s suffering and struggle continues. Thus, as in *El material humano*, we see various individual stories, which are related in some ways but different in many others. This film’s story can be seen from the perspective of a young boy who is observing the condition of his village, a mother who is trying to save her children and the young soldier who threatens and takes pride in describing his strength, but at the same time misses his days playing and spending time with his friends.

Though aspects such as individual versus collective memories are present in contemporary narratives (showing that there is a continuity between the past and present), they depict the consequence of the violent war in today’s time. They show how the civil war, torture, and disappearances completely altered people’s lives. Central Americans might have become used to being surrounded by danger and violence, but they are still struggling to situate or even give a name to the forms that present-day violence takes. This violence is different from the civil war, but it is no less dangerous. Contemporary texts and films connect the situation today to the memories of a violent past and provoke the reader to be an active participant in witnessing the transition from civil war to neoliberal economy.

4.6 Memory and Trauma in Neoliberal Times

In this section, we see how contemporary works of fiction bring the past into the present and demonstrate a continuity between the two. We have noted the way in which the division between war and peace, trauma and normality, is blurred as violence comes to seem a constant fact of life, and so traumatic memory is present but expressed differently. Also, we are aware that memory is an important component in neoliberal society where the market and the State use it to homogenize diversity. Therefore, memory needs new techniques to challenge such uniformity across the Central American countries to make the past relevant. In this section we see the

subversive techniques that not only allow us to access the past and relate it to the present but also challenge the appropriation of memory by the market. Unlike the earlier reading, these works of fiction present narratives from various sources, thus demonstrating the heterogeneity of memory and denouncing the market's tendency towards homogeneity and equivalence. Narratives about the past from different sources lead the market astray in its drive to appropriate memory, as it is difficult to indicate the story-telling strategy. For example, in *El material humano*, the narrator generally goes to different places and collects information that he shares with his readers. On one such occasion, the narrator reads the newspaper and reports: “en el año 2006 se registraron cinco mil quinientas treinta y tres muertes violentas en territorio guatemalteco, de las cuales solo un cinco por ciento aproximadamente fueron investigadas por las autoridades; y sesenta y cuatro defensores de los derechos humanos han sido asesinados en Guatemala en los últimos cinco años” (103). The stories read or researched in the newspaper provide one source among many from which to understand contemporary Central America.

Further, *El material humano* addresses past traumatic events and their present-day relevance through the varied experiences of many people and the tales they have to tell are mediated in many forms. Memory is not restricted only to people telling stories about the past but also other sources. For example, the narrator refers to the documents in the archive as “memory”: “Me dicen que no tienen *Memorias* de la policía, que la biblioteca fue destruida por el fuego hace unos veinte años” (66). In another instance we look at the past through a dialogue with a person called Benedicto Tun who tells the narrator about one particularly shocking incident: “En fin, teníamos a la vista a un joven que acababan de torturar, con la cara deformada y equimosis por todos lados, que estaba tirado en un rincón, posiblemente moribundo” (153). Again, we see something similar when the narrator talks to his daughter's schoolteacher who

tells him about the experience of an ex-guerrilla she had met in Mexico: “fue torturada por la policía. Sobrevivió, y ahora vive ‘normalmente’ en Londres. Esta mujer le dijo que con el tiempo había llegado a perdonar a sus torturadores, pero no sus antiguos jefes” (165). The text therefore comes to comprise a collage of different voices challenging the uniform narrative that neoliberal society or the market promotes.

The intersection of individual and community memory is not very well demarcated, because the narrator is investigating the past in the archives and trying to find a connection with the present. Hence the story of the community, the trauma, and the suffering that the country has experienced are not narrated in the linear fashion that we have observed in classic *testimonio*; rather, the past and present are explored simultaneously. In contemporary fiction, the role of memory is not just to know the past but to understand the present better. The present is also chaotic, violent and hopeless; hence, such narratives not just question the past through memory, but also emphasize the continuity between the past and the present. The narrator, here, investigates the archive and other sources that can help him explore the untold and unheard yet important stories from the past.

However, the narrator experiences trauma today not through the recollection of physical torture, as we have seen in classic *testimonios*, but through his pressing dreams. Trauma and suffering are not confined to the past in Central American literature and films, irrelevant to the present: the traumatic past interrupts the life of people in the present. The technique used here to describe the present traumatic memory is through the protagonist’s nightmares. The narrator describes a nightmare as: “largo y angustioso sueño de persecución policíaca—el perseguido soy yo. Dirige la cacería un personaje que supongo que mi subconsciente creó inspirado en el Viejo Tun” (142-143). We observe the interruption of suffering and past trauma in the present life as

the narrator dreams of Tun, a character from the past; he regularly discusses “el Viejo Tun” with Tun’s son. In addition, the example does not give a reason for the “police persecution” that the narrator experiences. Therefore, the text brings an element of suspense and mystery to the history that is present in the current situation in Central America. Such elements also demonstrate the continuity with the earlier readings of *testimonio* where past events are suspicious and unresolved.

The text itself emphasizes the thrilling aspect of memory, as in one entry that the protagonist writes in his diary: “Primera visita al Archivo General de Centroamérica ... en busca de más *Memorias de Labores de la Policía Nacional*, mientras dura ‘el suspenso’” (65). Elsewhere, the protagonist dreams of his mother’s death: “¡Sueño de la muerte de mi madre! Breve pero intensa agonía, en mis brazos. Ha caído de espaldas y se ha dado un golpe en la cabeza Despierto entre sollozos” (95). This dream also reflects the past as his mother was once kidnapped, and when she was released she entered in her diary the description of the time she was kidnapped. These examples of nightmares subvert the notion that we are over with the past, as the protagonist continuously brings back the traumatic memory in the present, while also posing a challenge to neoliberal society to interpret such narratives (nightmares) and categorize them for further appropriation. However, they are not just traumas of the past irrelevant to the present; rather, they are repercussions of the past as in today’s time, he dreams of being persecuted or his mother dying. These nightmares can be described as suffocating, distressing, and dangerous where the protagonist is curious about the past; the past is mysterious, and the present is also uncertain. As this fiction explores memory from various sources, it avoids not only homogeneity but also repeating the already-discussed events again and again. It focuses on fresh incidents from the past and its relationship with the present, which makes readers curious

about the past. This strategy takes away the boring or stagnant aspect of the past that has been created through repetition. The contemporary literary works resonate with Argenti and Schramm's suggestion that the past produced through memories is "partial, unstable, often contested, and prone to becoming sites of struggle" (2).⁵³ And these characteristics—"partial," "unstable," and "contested"—not only make for diverse narratives of the past, but allow many stories to emerge in the present to re-create the past in a heterogeneous way, thus, questioning the homogeneity promoted by the market.

In *Voces inocentes*, too, trauma is an important aspect but is handled differently. Here, traumatic memory from the past is not mysterious; rather, the film focuses on how children react to such life-changing events. For example, Chava, who at the beginning of the film is jovial, naughty, and playful, changes to a more serious and mature boy by the end, even promising his mother he would rescue his younger brother before he turned twelve, the age for recruitment to the army. Oscar Somoza adds: "Chava se salva de la muerte, pero por las circunstancias de la guerra, el mundo inocente de la niñez se trastoca y se convierte en un lugar de violencia, ... y donde los niños se ven obligados a convertirse en adultos antes de tiempo" (*Ecos de la memoria* 27-28). Where Chava became an adult to deal with the violence, his friend Antonio also had to be mature enough to survive in the army at the age of 12. As Somoza states, "Un aspecto trágico de la vida de Antonio como personaje es que tiene que adaptarse a las exigencias de los militares y luchar contra su propia gente y sobre todo matar para sobrevivir" (26).

However, the trauma in the film is not narrated by its protagonist as it is in *El material humano*, but through the medium of cinematography; at significant moments, the camera eye takes over from the native informant. For example, La Angelita, Rosita's friend, is killed in a

⁵³ "Memory—in all of its heterogeneity, its instability and its liability to contestation—represents 'that history that cannot be written'" (2).

confrontation and Chava and his uncle Beto rush to help but cannot save her. We then see Rosita's sadness the following day. Just as *El material humano* subverts narrative homogeneity by gathering up voices from a variety of sources, similarly in *Voces inocentes*, the presence of the camera allows the film to portray a diversity of voices and perspectives. There are many moments that are visible to the viewer but are invisible or hidden from the film's characters. For example, when the army comes to the village as part of a campaign of forced recruitment, the camera's point of view enables us to see kids hiding on the rooves of the village's houses. The army does not know that the kids are hiding up there, but the viewers see them. In another scene (almost at the end of the film), Chava escapes death at the hands of the army and runs home only to find out that his house has been burned to the ground. Soon afterwards, almost devoid of hope, Chava's mother comes looking for him and starts crying at the thought that she has lost him forever. The viewer, however, knows that, unbeknownst to each other, they are both alive and are in the same place. This scene brings some relief to the viewer as we know that the two are so close to each other, at the same time that it also generates curiosity or suspense as to whether they will finally find each other. The camera enables us to see more than what is contained in Chava's narration. It stands in for impersonal, perhaps communal, forms of possible perception. Hence individual and communal memory are in constant dialogue with each other and, at the same time, the camera gives us access to spaces of which Chava is unaware.

We also observe trauma and tragedy for the first time in school when there is a shoot-out between the army and the guerillas in and around the school. Bodies of many children are taken after the firing is over, the priest is tortured and beaten by the soldiers inside the church. As in *El material humano*, this text goes back and forth between normality and trauma, and the film score provides a varied setting for both aspects of life—trauma and the happy moments in the war-torn

village. For instance, we see young boys playing and singing before the army announces that they will come to pick them up the next day. In another instance, Chava is in contact by radio with his uncle Beto and his friends who are guerrillas, but as soon as he sees soldiers, he switches the channel to loud music irrelevant to the situation and so makes his escape. Chava and his friends also sing and dance in front of the house where his girlfriend stays. Music here suggests a veneer of normality as the kids go about their regular activities. Yet, it is also used to project trauma, as when La Angelita dies and Beto mourns and expresses the grief of his people through a song: “Qué triste se oye la lluvia en los techos de cartón, qué triste vive mi gente en las casas de cartón.” Another technique that can be observed in the film is the portrayal of rain to express moments of sorrow. The first two scenes when Chava and his friends are taken to be killed by the army, and the next scene where Chava’s father leaves his family behind to travel to the United States, are both shot in the rain. Another rainy scene is when Chava sees that his girlfriend’s house is completely burnt and devoid of life. These scenes are often dark and gloomy to indicate death and separation. The film thus employs camera position, music, and mise en scène to access memories that are both happy and traumatic, just like the nightmares in *El material humano*.

Unlike classic *testimonios*, contemporary narratives are more densely layered—here for instance with nightmares, cinematography and music that are background or overlay for the main narrative. These characteristics, apart from demonstrating a heterogeneous past that manifests itself in varied ways in the stories, reveal a relationship not only between contemporary narratives and classic *testimonios*, but also between the past and the present. Such techniques challenge the official and recurrent history in neoliberal society and bring in fresh stories from

the past that can entice their readers and viewers to learn and think more about the issues depicted.

4.7 Conclusion

Nelly Richard states that “if ‘giving an account’ of what happened means not betraying the memory of what the present leaves behind as pain and affliction in words that carry no scars (not to subject the memory of the victims to the humiliation of seeing their past narrated in the unscathed language of the triumphant narrative of actuality), then the question about memory is concerned with the nexus between memory, language, and fissures of representation” (*Cultural Residues* 6). *Testimonio*, which emerged to provide new stories from the past, to generate fresh discussion around the subaltern past and to consider memory as a tool for such narratives, became restricted to an exploration of only a certain kind. A re-reading of earlier *testimonios* with an emphasis on memory not simply to re-tell stories about solidarity, resistance or violence, but to recall other factors—like life before the trauma, its after-effects and the role of thrill or suspense—will revive the past and the reading strategy of *testimonio* once again. Richard adds:

Memory stirs up the static fact of the past with new unclosed meanings that put its recollections to work, causing both beginnings and endings to rewrite new hypotheses and conjectures and thereby dismantle the explanatory closures of totalities that are too sure of themselves. And it is the laboriousness of that unsatisfied memory that never admits defeat, that perturbs the official burial of that memory seen simply as a fixed deposit of inactive meanings. (17)

Classic as well as contemporary narratives read as *testimonio* need not focus on how an individual memory can become collective. Instead, varied individual memories can collectively address issues that were common to a community without losing their diversity. We also

observed in the contemporary narratives that art provides different techniques to talk about such events (like nightmares, music, and cinematography). Thus, it is important to search for such techniques in the narratives that depict the past and see if they are questioning the official memories initiated by the State and the market.

Besides, *testimonio* as a reading strategy needs to be explored as we see that it has the potential to subvert conventional stories and provide a voice to those who have been seen as unimportant. Reading contemporary texts as *testimonio* and re-reading classic *testimonios* with a focus on memory can bring issues to account from the past and show their relevance to the present. It also proves that the past is not “simply a fixed deposit of inactive meanings” (Richard 17). In other words, terms like oppression, resistance, violence, and chaos that prevailed in the past are not the only important factors. If we keep stressing these issues and overlook others, the past will come to seem stagnant and repetitious. Such factors can distance the past from the present and break historical continuity. We need to focus again on what is at stake in defining a text as either *testimonio* or literature; elements that we strongly associate with one but not the other turn out to be not as rigid as we think. They are flexible and make their presence felt in both *testimonios* and literature. We must therefore question the presumptions and labels that we have affixed not only to *testimonio* but also to literary texts, labels that restrict these texts’ potential, and we must explore new reading strategies of contemporary Central American narrative considered as a whole. We can then use *testimonio* once more as an approach to confront injustices (injustices narrated in a diverse manner as well as with various techniques) of the past and the present, build a connection between them, and continue to keep *testimonio* alive as a way to approach Latin American texts in all periods.

Conclusion

This thesis has traced the testimonial genre which reached its apogee in the late twentieth century during the Central American civil wars and Southern Cone dictatorships, only to be declared dead with the coming of peace agreements and democracy. *Testimonio*, which was often defined by the fact that it was not overtly literary, brought fresh stories from the margins of Latin America, and challenged cultural norms and Western consciences. In a context in which canonical literature was dominated by middle-class, white and mestizo and mostly male authors, it was felt that the literary canon could not represent the subalterns who were the victims of state violence (and often, protagonists of the resistance against it) and their experiences. There was a need (and a desire) to hear stories from outside the mainstream, and narratives that might be distinct from those produced by celebrated authors such as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar or Pablo Neruda. Thus, *testimonio* was an alternative to literature; it was perceived as a means to convey the true, authentic and real-life stories of subaltern Latin Americans.

Testimonio caught on and was taught in schools and colleges in North America not simply to understand the relationship that the United States has with neighbouring countries but also to provide a glimpse to other ways of living, different cultures, and people's struggle to survive. This thesis showed how the testimonial genre was canonized in North American academia. However, in the first chapter we saw the excitement and hope that initially surrounded *testimonio* gradually took a different turn. The definitions associated with the genre, like truth and authenticity, restricted its reading exploration. Thus, they began to dominate the diverse approach towards *testimonio*. We have seen that critics have regarded texts from varied backgrounds as *testimonio*, for example, *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) and *Canción de Rachel* (1979) by Miguel Barnet, *Operación masacre* (1957) by Rodolfo Walsh, *Miguel Mármol*

(1972) by Roque Dalton and *Si me permiten hablar* (1977) by Domitila Barrios de Chungara. Hence, debates and disagreements arose: critics had different opinions on perceiving texts as *testimonio*, but more importantly the “culture wars” of the 1980s left academia divided between liberals and conservatives. Liberals celebrated the canonization of *testimonio* as a genre, and its challenge to the canon as an alternative to elite literary texts, but conservatives (such as Dinesh D’Souza) argued that *testimonio* was unfit for university education.

This debate (the celebration and criticism of the new canonized genre) took an ugly turn when the most famous *testimonio* of all, Rigoberta Menchú’s *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), was challenged by anthropologist David Stoll on the grounds of its supposed misrepresentation of the situation in Guatemala. Stoll’s *Rigoberta Menchú and The Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999) argued that Menchú did not speak the truth in her *testimonio*, and implicitly then that it fell at the first hurdle of criteria established for the testimonial genre. Some critics stood by Menchú’s *testimonio* and questioned Stoll’s authority, but others accused her of deceit and demanded that the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded to Menchú in 1992, should be returned. Amid the controversy around Menchú’s text and the testimonial genre, the characteristics that were principally associated with the genre—its incarnation of an authentic subaltern voice, its capacity to provide stories from the margin and a voice against the injustice—got lost. The genre was declared dead, a relic (and itself, a victim) of Cold War proxy conflicts.

Critics argued that the “moment of *testimonio* is over” (Beverley, *Testimonio* 77) and that we must look for other forms of expression. Yet this dissertation has argued (and hopes to have shown) throughout that *testimonio* is far from dead; it continues to have a life far beyond the narrow confines of the definitions and debates of the 1980s and 1990s. After all, *testimonio* as a

form of reading a narrative text was present long before the genre's canonization (for instance, in the sixteenth-century first-person narratives told by soldiers or clerics about their sojourns in the new world). And it is still present today. It was the canonization of *testimonio* as a non-fiction narrative form in North America that restricted its exploration and led to the dead end of controversy and debate. Thus, *testimonio* should not be read only as factual and against fiction; this limited viewpoint blocks the diverse reading strategies that testimonial texts can provoke. For by its very nature, *testimonio* gives its readers scope for a variety of interpretative strategies. We need to look beyond (if not leave behind) the aspects of *testimonio* that have been debated to death and contribute new factors. We need to think again about the dichotomy between fact and fiction, truth and lies, elite and subaltern narratives and question them in our interpretation of texts as *testimonio*.

This thesis therefore examined elements of the testimonial genre that have been little explored, though they made significant contributions to these texts' narrative drive. It then traced the ways in which these same elements are also present in contemporary fiction that is seldom associated with the testimonial genre. Thus, this study attempted to read the present-day fictions as *testimonio* and at the same time has shown that classic *testimonios* were not simply factual but also consist of literary aspects. For example, the second chapter discussed transnationalism: Classic *testimonios*, like Miguel Mármol, *The Little School*, or *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, were already transnational, even if they were repeatedly viewed within the lens of struggles for *national* liberation. For the narrators of these texts described the social unrest and the political oppression of their countries from afar, as exiles or refugees, inevitably adding a global dimension to their story, even if this was then downplayed by their editors and interlocutors. Moreover, the readership for *testimonio* was always international; indeed, the genre was more

popular in the North than in Latin America itself, and many testimonial texts were immediately translated or even appeared in English first. Once we are aware of this transnationalism, it affects the reading of *testimonio*, as it can bring up questions such as how a narrator's life in exile will affect her or his story? How does one cope with exile?

Transnationalism can also be seen in contemporary Central American fictions. Texts such as Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier*, Mario Bencastro's *Odyssey to the North*, and Francisco Goldman's *The Long Night of White Chickens* all situate their stories in and between both Central America and the United States. Above all, they emphasize transnationalism through the issue of migration, which is a major post-war concern, particularly in the United States. This shows that elements found in classic *testimonios* (such as transnationalism) exist in present-day fictions as well; it, therefore, challenges the notions with which we approach *testimonios* and literary texts alike. However, as contemporary texts focus on the repercussions of the civil war, we do not only read about revolutionary or political activists' life in exile, but also about common men and women who want to cross the border to live a violence-free and peaceful life in the United States. These narratives, therefore, involve the protagonists' life in their home country and in the North. Readers can study and compare (particularly) urban life in Central America and in the United States, the immigrants' past and present, and glimpse the hopes and dreams with which they began their journey for the United States.

Another factor common to both *testimonio* and recent fiction is memory. We saw that aspects of memory, such as its relationship to trauma (how it is shaped by trauma and seeks to overcome it), should be understood and analyzed in the classic *testimonios*. Memory and trauma help us to understand the behavioral change and the harm that violence inflicts on a victim's life. Besides, memory represents other elements to help us understand the events of the past better,

like thrill and mystery. They not only give readers a narrative hook to encourage continued reading, but also challenge the dichotomy between literature and *testimonio*. We explored such elements in contemporary texts as well as in classic *testimonios*, providing a reason to consider and re-read not just the earlier texts but also the present-day fiction from Central America as *testimonio*. Pointing out these elements, as well as the continuity and resonance between classic *testimonio* and contemporary fiction, shows that *testimonio* is far from dead; it exists and is as diverse as ever. Classifying post-civil war narratives as (merely) fiction and classic *testimonios* as fact reductively simplifies these creative productions and also the issues that they present. Today, critics have once again started favoring literature over *testimonio* (as we favored *testimonio* over literature during the eighties in the Latin American studies). Mario Roberto Morales in “Identidades mestizas y ficción literaria” (1998) or Alexandra Ortiz Wallner, in *El arte de ficcionar* (2012), challenge the dichotomy between literature and *testimonio* in Central American narratives, but homogenize the reading strategy under the banner of “mestizaje” and “fiction” respectively. Such homogenization can lead to an appropriation of the subversive voices that these texts produce by the market, or lead to boredom and stagnation, which will eventually result in the death of the creative works (as happened earlier with *testimonio*). We must maintain the ambiguity and ambivalence between literature and *testimonio* (keeping them both active through our readings); as soon as we define a text as fictional or factual, we reduce its complexity. One of the main objectives of this research is not just to show the existence of testimonial reading in contemporary times, but to highlight the overlaps between *testimonio* and literature while respecting their differences.

Further, in chapter three, I argued that a reader can see a conscious effort by the contemporary Central American authors to incorporate testimonial elements in their fictions. It is

not simply a matter of reading texts as *testimonio*; authors deliberately set out to employ testimonial aspects in their narratives—and at the same time challenge them. They parodically subvert the testimonial characteristics and force readers to re-think and re-read *testimonio* from a fresh perspective. However, with such challenges to the testimonial genre of the eighties and the nineties, the writers also emphasize the ongoing importance of *testimonio* today. Indeed, they do not just demonstrate the importance of the testimonial genre as literary legacy; perhaps, they attempt to revive it. Yet a reader unaware of *testimonio* will not be able to appreciate the connection and the complex play that results. An informed reading, by contrast, points up aspects such as humor, suspense, and a critique of the post-war Central American society. Thus, reading these texts as *testimonio* is just one of the many ways of approaching these creative works. They are not confined to one reading strategy (as we saw in the introduction that contemporary Central American fictions were also interpreted as autofiction), however, identifying the connection with the testimonial genre of the eighties helps the reader to appreciate not only textual nuances but also the relation to the past and history in the context of a neoliberal order whose tendency is to sunder the past from the present.

This dissertation took a step further by arguing that to expand the horizon of reading *testimonio*, and to understand present-day Central American society well, it is not enough to read a broader range of texts in testimonial terms, but also to see films and documentaries as *testimonio*. Chapter 4 showed how a feature film, in this case *Voces inocentes*, can contain testimonial elements. Restricting our notion of *testimonio* to texts as an exclusive medium of interpretation, can exhaust the reading strategy and lead to death of *testimonio*, as happened earlier. Alternatively, exploring and incorporating varied forms of reading and viewing can make *testimonio* vibrant and maintain its voice against injustice. It may be that the testimonial impulse

or spirit can equally be seen today in everything from brief Twitter missives to YouTube videos uploaded from sites of strife and trauma. These changes in form should not dissuade us from employing interpretative strategies honed in the reading of classic testimonial texts, long-form narratives produced by the collaboration between subaltern subject and *letrado* interlocutor.

Testimonio came to prominence in Central America in the midst of the region's civil wars, but it did not fade away with the peace agreements that (supposedly) put an end to the violence and formally led to social peace. *Testimonio* was a voice of the marginalised, a protest against oppression, and in as much as these factors still exist in contemporary Central America, so does *testimonio*. But if once it was the state that was the most obvious agent of exploitation and oppression, today it is the market which together with the state (duopoly as argued by Levinson) controls the cultural productions of Central American society. Thus, *testimonio* now tells the stories of the region's social conditions under neoliberalism. The violence and injustice that provoked (and were in many cases exacerbated by) civil war did not disappear. Not only are they still present today, but if anything, they have further deteriorated the condition of the region. For example, unpunished assassination has now become a part of the daily life of Central Americans, as we saw in *El material humano*, and violence has even taken the form of entertainment, as in *El hombre de Montserrat*. Crime and injustice may have changed their form, from just being news in the television that worried and scared the spectators to the form of entertainment that people consume as a source of diversion in the contemporary neoliberal world, but they are still more present today. I have attempted to read such fictions as *testimonio* since they have similarities with the earlier texts, but they differ as they go beyond the debates of fact and fiction or truth and lies and explore other elements less discussed.

At the same time, I re-read classic *testimonios* such as *Miguel Mármol* and *Operación masacre* and argue that though they have been defined as authentic and factual stories, we can find literary elements in them, like suspense and thrill. Comparisons between classic *testimonio* and contemporary fiction from the region therefore not only show similarities in the issues that were common to both, but also demonstrate that *testimonio* can be an important strategy to read narratives that have literary aspects in them; *testimonio* need not always be based on facts. At the same time, we should not read the contemporary texts only as fiction, as they may contain testimonial elements as well. *Testimonio* as a reading strategy did not disappear; it continues today as a means to reflect on present-day problems and connect with the past as well.

This study thus opens up new ways to read not only classic *testimonios* but also a broad range of Central American fiction. Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Moronga* (2018), for instance, or Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *Los sordos* (2012) continue to reflect on post-civil war Central American society. *Moronga* describes the horror of the past that Salvadorans live with in the United States and the struggle to establish oneself in the new country. The text describes memory and trauma like other texts by Moya discussed in the dissertation—*Insensatez* and *El asco*. Ronald Saenz Leandro states that “*Moronga* deambula toda una diáspora de salvadoreños, hondureños y guatemaltecos que convive diariamente en el Estados Unidos paranoico actual de la vigilancia, los tiroteos públicos y la lucha contra el terrorismo” (“El eterno retorno a la diáspora de la memoria: *Moronga* de Horacio Castellanos Moya,” 346). The book focuses on the consequences of the civil war, particularly in the life of the ex-guerrilla or ex-military soldiers in the United States. Moya demonstrates that violence, oppression and injustices are present today in the form of drug-trafficking, migration and criminal organization (such as the “mara salvatrucha”). He argues that such issues do not belong to the past nor died away with the civil war but exist in

contemporary society as well. In fact, these same concerns that once were the focus of classic testimonial narratives are now more urgent than ever before: no longer are they limited within the national boundaries of the region, but they also travel across the nation along with the people.

Rey Rosa's *Los sordos* depicts a contemporary Guatemala in which kidnapping, and murder are so much part of everyday life that they hardly attract comment. Rey Rosa notes the ubiquity of such violence in the country today even as he expresses the utopian hope it might end: "Es posible, es deseable, que dentro de unos años lectores no recuerden el significado de algunas expresiones que aparecen en estas páginas de ficción y que son comunes en el habla Guatemala" (*Los sordos* 11). Rey Rosa thus reflects both on the ongoing dangers in Guatemala and on the fact that people in the post-war period are used to it. They consider such a life as "normal" and therefore are able to forget violent acts in no time. *Los sordos* revolves around a kidnapping: we read how Clara, the daughter of "el amable tirano" don Claudio, and Andrés, a deaf and dumb boy are disappeared. Andrés is a Kiche Indian who lives with his grandmother and sister in San Miguel Nagualapan. Clara disappears from her home despite having a bodyguard, whereas Andrés disappears after a bus in which he is travelling, like always, with his grandmother and his sister to the market, gets into an accident. After the accident, when the grandmother comes to her senses she discovers that Andrés's sister has died, and Andrés himself has disappeared. Crimes and injustices which were serious issues in the Central American society have now turned into regular activity.

A documentary such as *La Isla: Archives of a Tragedy* (2009), by Uli Stelzner, is another narrative which can be viewed as *testimonio*. It is based on the discovery of documents of disappeared people in Guatemala who were killed or abducted by the police or the army during the civil war. Many years afterwards, families and friends can find out in the archives about their

relatives who were disappeared. *El lugar mas pequeño* (2011), by the Mexican/Salvadoran director Tatiana Huezo Sánchez, is likewise a Salvadoran documentary based on the repercussions of the civil war. This movie is about five families who return to their place of origin after the war, and it reflects on the process of how these families reconstruct their life. Meanwhile, *Princesas rojas* (2014), by Laura Astorga Carrera, is based on the impact that the civil war, revolutionary parents, and life in clandestinity have on children, or *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (2008), by Roberto Davila, depicts a guerrilla fighter and a soldier collaborating to survive in the forests of Guazapa during the civil war, to emphasize that leaving the past behind will not make the present understandable. We need not only to review the past, but also bring back the forms of viewing or reading by which we understood such problems. It is through our reading and viewing strategy that we can continue to maintain the complexities of these artistic creations and at same time challenge the neoliberal tendency to appropriate and profit from such creativity. This will help us to maintain the voice of subversion not only in Latin American artistic creations but also in other postcolonial societies.

India, for example, is a country whose literary and narrative tradition could benefit from a testimonial reading along the lines suggested in this thesis. There are enough issues common to both India and Latin America. Though they are far apart from one another geographically, and though they have distinct histories and political conditions, some issues resonate in both places— not least their shared postcolonial experience of injustice and violence, and the shock of rapid neoliberal marketization. *Testimonio* can help us to relate certain socio-political conditions of Latin America with India. For example, the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir, or the resistance in Northeastern regions of India towards the Central Government, make us see that resistance,

oppression and violence are not factors that exist in Latin American society alone but also in other parts of the world.

The Collaborator (2012), by Mirza Waheed, describes the situation of Kashmir from the perspective of a young boy during the early 1990s when terrorism began to affect the country. It is a first-person narrative by a young boy from the shepherd community living with his parents near the border between India and Pakistan. The story is about the boy's frustration when, on the one hand, he starts to notice that all his friends are gradually disappearing (crossing the border) to train as militants, and on the other, must work for the Indian army, examining the dead bodies that they have killed to uncover their identities or other important belongings. The boy describes the search as a horrible experience since he thinks that he may come across some of his friends' bodies who have crossed the border. *The Collaborator* can be read as *testimonio* in that it has characteristics that defined *testimonio* as a genre in the eighties and nineties: it raises a collective voice, as the narrator belongs to the *bakarwal* tribes/castes or shepherd community and he narrates his story as one of the people from that community about their life in Kashmir. He also describes how religion (previously not quite important to them) suddenly in the eighties becomes a major part of their life with the militant uprising. He further describes how much he disliked working for the Indian army and their behavior towards his people.

The book does not only give an account of the shepherd/*bakarwal*'s community, but it also depicts the life of the Indian soldiers fighting in a distant land, a culture or a language they do not understand or speak. Apart from its testimonial elements (like the first-person narrative, the collective voice, and struggling to stay away from both the militancy and the Indian army), this text also has literary elements. For example, it reflects on the difficulty of a young boy and his initial quest to find out where his friends have gone leaving him behind. The curiosity to

know how one crosses the border and the people involved in it adds thrill to the story. Reviewing the book, Arundhati Roy reports that “With flashes of brilliance, tenderness and fury, *The Collaborator* does what fiction should. It makes you listen.” Finally, it invokes in the reader a sense of curiosity as to what happens to the boy by the end of the narrative; thus, it also adds suspense to the story.

Another book from the same state that could be read as *testimonio* is Rahul Pandita’s *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* (2013). This is about the Kashmiri pundits or Brahmins forced to leave Kashmir during the insurgency of the early nineties. This is the same period as *The Collaborator*, but narrated from the perspective of a Hindu, rather than a Muslim. The narrator here speaks of the difficulties that his community experiences once they leave Kashmir, describing the journey from Kashmir to other parts of India where they settle as refugees in tents. They not only live homeless for many years, but also deal with the trauma of losing their near and dear ones, leaving their home or place of origin behind. However, the description of the moment when the narrator and his family leave home add tension and thrill to the narrative. The narrator also invokes phrases, like “hum kya chaaahte—Azadiiii!”⁵⁴ (8), which for people outside Kashmir would not mean much but for him: “it frightens me. Images of those days return to haunt me. People out on the roads. People peering out of their windows. People on the rooftops of buses. In shikaras. And in mosques” (9). *Our Moon has Blood Clots* makes a true event vivid through the story it tells, but also warns its readers that this truth is not the only one. The Kashmiri Muslims and Hindus retain their respective truths of those years: “the topic always veered towards the events of 1989-90, and that was the point at which our truths became different” (45). Thus, like

⁵⁴ The English translation would be “what do we want—freedom!” (8).

contemporary Central American fictions (read as *testimonio* in this dissertation) Indian texts also challenge the veracity yet highlight the importance of narratives of struggle.

Some Indian critics have already begun a comparison between Latin American and Indian texts as *testimonio*, specifically in context of Dalit (lower/schedule caste) literature and women's narratives. For example, Promod K. Nayar compares Dalit writing to the testimonial genre: "Like *testimonio*, Dalit writings are narratives of trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change. Dalit texts document the sufferings of and atrocities committed upon a large section of the population. The writing proceeds from a lived experience of poverty, violence, rejection and suffering" ("Bama's Karukku" 83). The key factors that link Dalit texts to *testimonio* are resistance, trauma, violence, and suffering. Moreover, these narratives also belong to the margins of literature and were often excluded from academic courses, as we saw with the texts considered as *testimonios* in the eighties. Sharmila Rege states: "There were no selections from Dalit literature and life narratives in our readings or classes and therefore the epistemological challenge posed by the Dalit movement and literature to received social science frameworks was lost to us" (*Writing Caste/Writing Gender* 1). Thus, critics from India have noted that Dalit literature and Latin American *testimonio* share the subaltern voice and a struggle against authority (though the notion of authority is distinct in these areas). Sonya Gupta and Vijaya Venkataraman state that:

While representing an affirmation of the individual subject, it situates this individual subject within a marginalized, oppressed group or class. In an interesting move, the term *testimonio* and its generic configurations are increasingly being used in India to discuss Dalit and women life-narratives. Dalit and women's autobiographies and testimonial narratives, which have been compared to Black autobiographies, are now also being read

in the critical framework of the Latin American testimonio not only in terms of their narrative strategies and content, but also in terms of their location in the critical academic discourse. (“Living to Tell the Tale” 187)

If critics have begun to read Indian narratives that focus on violence and injustice as *testimonio*, the lesson of this dissertation is that we must not limit this reading to Dalit writing or women’s autobiographies alone. We can see that texts from Kashmir have elements of both classic *testimonio* and contemporary Central American fiction. Thus, *testimonio* in India need not be limited to resistance or caste-based narratives but (like Central American fictions that have testimonial elements) can be a voice against crime, oppression, or injustice in any part of the society. Moreover, the diverse reading of such narratives can add new elements to the testimonial approach. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, factors like thrill, suspense, and humor can be a part of reading narratives as *testimonio*; stories like *Our Moon Has Blood Clots* add that we do not have to claim our truth as the only one, but that truth can also be heterogenous.

These texts demonstrate that India and Latin America have common concerns like the struggle for justice and recognition, whether that be in terms of indigeneity or caste, civil war or terrorism. Specifically the similarities could be seen in the form of repercussions of the violence produced in these struggles. However, I do not intend to evaluate them on a single platform as these problems have emerged under specific historic, cultural, and political conditions. I propose that *testimonio*, which is subversive in nature, can help us to understand as well as compare the problems of these third-world nations. As I have shown in this thesis, *testimonio* not only challenges dominant narrative structures, but it is also flexible enough to adapt itself to different contexts and traditions, and to different issues related to injustice, and it can offer us stories from a varied perspective. Thus, a reading practice that was developed in Latin America can be used

to read narratives from India (because of its flexible and adaptable nature) and can also open doors for a dialogue between South Asia and Latin America. *Testimonio* can unite subaltern voices across the world in the cause of international solidarity.

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