

evident in different ways in Stoll's critique of testimonio and Hardt and Negri's *Empire* seems in some ways more part of the problem than the solution. It is part of the problem not only because it disenables agency; it also disenables a clear and compelling vision of the kind of society we claim to stand for.

## 1 The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio

The deformed Caliban—enslaved, robbed of his island, and trained to speak by Prospero—rebukes him thus: “You taught me language and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse.”<sup>1</sup>

Do social struggles give rise to new forms of literature, or is it more a question of the adequacy of their representation in existing narrative forms such as the short story and the novel, as in, for example, Gayatri Spivak's articulations of the stories of the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi or Fredric Jameson's notion of national allegory in *Third World Writing*?<sup>2</sup> What happens when, as in the case of western Europe since the Renaissance, there has been a complicity between the rise of “literature” as a secular institution and the development of forms of colonial and imperialist oppression against which many of these struggles are directed? Are there experiences in the world today that would be betrayed or misrepresented by the forms of literature as we know it?

Raymond Williams formulates a similar question in relation to British working-class writing:

Very few if any of us could write at all if certain forms were not available. And then we may be lucky, we may find forms which correspond

to our experience. But take the case of the nineteenth century working-class writers, who wanted to write about their working lives. The most popular form was the novel, but though they had marvelous material that could go into the novel very few of them managed to write good or any novels. Instead they wrote marvelous autobiographies. Why? Because the form coming down through the religious tradition was of a witness confessing the story of his life, or there was the defense speech at a trial when a man tells the judge who he is and what he had done, or of course other kinds of speech. These oral forms were more accessible forms centered on "I," on the single person. . . . The novel with its quite different narrative forms was virtually impenetrable to working-class writers for three or four generations, and there are still many problems in using the received forms for what is, in the end, very different material. Indeed the forms of working-class consciousness are bound to be different from the literary forms of another class, and it is a long struggle to find new and adequate forms.<sup>3</sup>

Let me set the frame of the discussion a bit differently than Williams does. In the period of what Marx describes as the primitive accumulation in western Europe—say 1400 to 1650, which is also the age of the formation of the great colonial empires—there appears or reappears, under the impetus of humanism, a series of literary forms: the essay; the short story or *novela ejemplar*; the picaresque novel; the various kinds of Petrarchan lyric, including the sonnet; the autobiography; and secular theater. These forms, as ideological practices, are also a *means* (in the sense that they contribute to the creation of the subject form of "European Man"). By the same token, then, we should expect an age such as our own—also one of transition or the potential for transition from one mode of production to another—to experience the emergence of new forms of cultural and literary expression that embody, in more or less thematically explicit and formally articulated ways, the social forces contending for power in the world today. I have in mind here, by analogy to the role of the bourgeoisie in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, not only the struggle of working people everywhere against exploitation, but also in contingent ways movements of ethnic or national liberation, the women's liberation movement, poor and oppressed peoples' organizations of all types, the gay rights movement, the peace movement, ecological activism, and the like. One of these new forms in embryo, I will argue, is the kind of narrative text that in Latin American Spanish has come to be called testimonio.

By testimonio I mean 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. 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. I will deal in particular with the distinctions among testimonio, life history, autobiography, and the all-encompassing term "documentary fiction" suggested by Barbara Foley.<sup>4</sup> However, 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.

As Williams suggests, 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 rather than being spoken for. But for practical purposes we can say that testimonio coalesced as a new narrative genre in the 1960s and further developed in close relation to the movements for national liberation and the generalized cultural radicalism of that decade. Testimonio is implicitly or explicitly a component of what Barbara Harlow has called "resistance literature."<sup>5</sup> In Latin America, where testimonio has enjoyed an especially rich development, it was sanctioned as a genre or mode by two related developments: the 1970 decision of Cuba's Casa de las Américas to begin awarding a prize in this category in its annual literary contest, and the reception in the late 1960s of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965) and Miguel Barnet's *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave/Biografía de un cimarrón* (1967).<sup>6</sup>

But 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* and the "national" essay (*Facundo, Os sertões*), the war diaries (*diarios de campaña*) of, for example, Bolívar or Martí, or the Romantic biography, a key genre of Latin American liberalism. This tradition combined with the wide popularity of the sort of anthropological or sociological life history composed out of tape-recorded narratives developed by academic social scientists such as Oscar Lewis or Ricardo Pozas in the 1950s.<sup>7</sup> Testimonio also drew on—in my opinion, much more crucially—the sort of direct-participant account, usually presented

without any literary or academic aspirations whatever (although often with political ones), represented by books such as Che Guevara's *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* (1959), one of the defining texts of 1960s leftist sensibility throughout the Americas. The success of Che's account (with its corresponding how-to manual, *Guerrilla Warfare*) inspired in Cuba a series of direct-participant testimonios by combatants in the July 26th Movement and later in the campaigns against the counterrevolutionary bands in the Escambray mountains and at the Bay of Pigs. In a related way (in some cases, directly), there begins to emerge throughout the Third World, and in very close connection to the spread of armed-struggle movements and the Vietnam War, a literature of personal witness and involvement designed to make the cause of these movements known to the outside world, to attract recruits, to reflect on successes or failures of the struggle, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

The Spanish word *testimonio* translates literally as "testimony," as in the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense. This connotation is important because it distinguishes *testimonio* from recorded participant narrative, as in the case of "oral history." In oral history it is the intentionality of the recorder—usually a social scientist—that is dominant, and the resulting text is in some sense "data." In *testimonio*, by contrast, it is the intentionality of the narrator that is paramount. 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. The position of the reader of *testimonio* is akin to that of a jury member in a courtroom. Unlike the novel, *testimonio* promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness. This relates *testimonio* to the generic 1960s practice of "speaking bitterness," to use the term popularized in the Chinese Cultural Revolution, evident, for example, in the consciousness-raising sessions of the women's liberation movement, Fanon's theory of decolonization, the pedagogy of Paulo Freire (one of the richest sources of testimonial material has been in the interaction of intellectuals, peasants, and working people in literacy campaigns), and Laingian and, in a very different way, Lacanian psychotherapies. *Testimonio*, in other words, is an instance of the New Left and feminist slogan "The personal is political."<sup>9</sup>

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 the tape-recording and then the transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is an intellectual, often a journalist or a writer. (To use the Russian formalist term,

*testimonio* is a sort of *skaz*, a literary simulacrum of oral narrative.) The nature of the intervention of this gathering and editing function is one of the more hotly debated theoretical points in the discussion of the genre, and I will come back to it. What needs to be noted here is that the assumed lack of writing ability or skill on the part of the narrator of the *testimonio*, even in those cases where the story is written instead of narrated orally, also contributes to the "truth effect" the form generates.

The situation of narration in the *testimonio* suggests an affinity with the picaresque novel, particularly with that sense of the picaresque that sees the hero's act of telling his or her life as yet another picaresque act. But *testimonio*, even where it approximates in content a kind of neo-picaresque, as it does quite often, is a basically different narrative mode. It is not, to begin with, fiction. We are meant to experience both the speaker and the situations and events recounted as real. The "legal" connotation implicit in its convention implies a pledge of honesty on the part of the narrator that the listener/reader is bound to respect.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, *testimonio* is concerned not so much with the life of a "problematic hero"—the term Georg Lukács uses to describe the nature of the hero of the bourgeois novel<sup>11</sup>—as with a problematic collective social situation in which the narrator lives. The situation of the narrator in *testimonio* is one that must be representative of a social class or group. In the picaresque novel, by contrast, a collective social predicament, such as unemployment and marginalization, is experienced and narrated as a personal destiny. The "I" that speaks to us in the picaresque or first-person novel is in general the mark of a difference, an antagonism to the community, the *Ich-form* (Hans Robert Jauss's term)<sup>12</sup> of the self-made man: hence the picaresque's cynicism about human nature, its rendering of lower-class types as comic, as opposed to the egalitarian reader-character relation implied by both the novel and *testimonio*. The narrator in *testimonio*, on the other hand, 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 the epic hero's hierarchical and patriarchal status. René Jara speaks of an "epicidad cotidiana," an everyday epicity, in *testimonio*.<sup>13</sup> Another way of putting this would be to define *testimonio* as a nonfictional, popular-democratic form of epic narrative.

By way of example, here is the opening of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, a well-known *testimonio* by a Guatemalan Indian woman:

My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty-three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my

people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.<sup>14</sup>

Rigoberta Menchú was and is an activist on behalf of her community, the Quiché-speaking indians of the western highlands of Guatemala, and so this statement of principles is perhaps a little more explicit than is usual in a testimonio. But the metonymic function of the narrative voice it declares is latent in the form, is part of its narrative convention, even in those cases when the narrator is, for example, a drug addict or criminal. Testimonio is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies that any life so narrated can have a kind of representational value. Each individual testimonio evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences. Thus, one common formal variation on the classic first-person singular testimonio is the polyphonic testimonio, made up of accounts by different participants in the same event.

What testimonio does have in common with the picaresque and with autobiography, however, is the powerful textual affirmation of the speaking subject. This should be evident in the passage from *I, Rigoberta Menchú* quoted above. The dominant formal aspect of the testimonio is the voice that speaks to the reader in the form of an "I" that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention. This presence of the voice, which we are meant to experience as the voice of a real rather than a fictional person, is the mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, a desire to impose oneself on an institution of power, such as literature, from the position of the excluded or the marginal. Fredric Jameson has spoken of the way in which testimonio produces a "new anonymity," a form of selfhood distinct from the "overripe subjectivity" of the modernist bildungsroman.<sup>15</sup> But this way of thinking about testimonio runs the risk of conceding to the subjects of testimonio only the "facelessness" that is already theirs in the dominant culture. One should note rather the insistence on and affirmation of the individual subject evident in such titles as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (even more strongly in the Spanish, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*), *Juan the Chamula* (Juan Pérez Jolote), *Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*, *Doris Tijerino: Inside the Nicaraguan Revolution* ("Somos millones . . .": *La vida de Doris María*).<sup>16</sup> Rather than a "decentered" subjectivity, which, in what has

been called the "Koreanization" of the world economy, is almost synonymous with cheap labor, testimonio constitutes an affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode.<sup>17</sup>

In a related way, testimonio implies a challenge to the loss of the authority of orality in the context of processes of cultural modernization that privilege literacy and literature as norms of expression. It allows the entry into literature of persons who would normally, in those societies where literature is a form of class privilege, be excluded from direct literary expression, persons who have had to be "represented" by professional writers. There is a great difference between having someone like Rigoberta Menchú tell the story of her people and having that story told, however well, by someone like, say, the Nobel Prize-winning Guatemalan novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias.<sup>18</sup>

Testimonio involves a sort of erasure of the function, and thus also of the textual presence, of the "author," which by contrast is so central in all major forms of bourgeois 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. In Miguel Barner's phrase, the author has been replaced in testimonio by the function of a "compiler" (*compilador*) or "activator" (*gestante*), somewhat on the model of the film producer.<sup>19</sup> There seems implicit in this situation both a challenge and an alternative to the patriarchal and elitist function the author plays in class and sexually and racially divided societies: in particular, a relief from the figure of the "great writer" or writer as cultural hero that is so much a part of the ideology of literary modernism.

The erasure of authorial presence in the testimonio, together with its nonfictional character, makes possible a different kind of complicity—might we call it fraternal/sororal?—between narrator and reader than is possible in the novel, which, as Lukács has demonstrated, obligates an ironic distancing on the part of both novelist and reader from the fate of the protagonist. Eliana Rivero, writing about *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde*, a testimonio by the Sandinista guerrilla comandante Omar Cabezas (published in English as *Fire from the Mountain*),<sup>20</sup> notes that "the act of speaking faithfully recorded on the tape, transcribed and then 'written' remains in the testimonio punctuated by a repeated series of interlocutive and conversational markers . . . which constantly put the reader on alert: 'True? Are you following me? OK? So . . .'" She concludes that the testimonio is a "snail-like discourse [*discurso encaracolado*] which turns on itself and which in the process totally deautomatizes the reaction of the reader, whose complicity it invites through the medium of his or her counterpart in the text, the direct interlocutor."<sup>21</sup>

Just 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 the narrator to this direct interlocutor. This is especially so when, as in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the narrator is someone who requires an interlocutor with a different ethnic and class background in order first to elicit the oral account, then to give it textual form as a testimonio, and finally to see to its publication and distribution. (In cases where testimonios are more directly a part of political or social activism—for example, in the use of testimonio in liberation theology-based community dialogues or as a kind of cadre literature internal to leftist or nationalist groups—these editorial functions are often handled directly by the party or movement in question, constituting then not only a new literary form but also new, noncommodified forms of literary production and distribution.)

I do not want to minimize the nature of these contradictions; among other things, they represent the possibility for a depoliticized articulation of the testimonio as a sort of *costumbrismo* (the Spanish word for “local-color” writing) of the subaltern or for the smothering of a genuine popular voice by well-intentioned but repressive (Stalinist, feminist, humanist, and so on) notions of “political correctness” or pertinence. But there is another way of looking at them. It is a truism that successful revolutionary movements in the colonial and postcolonial world have generally involved a union of working-class—or, to use the more inclusive term, popular—forces with a radicalized intelligentsia, drawn partly from formally educated sections of the peasantry and working class but also from the petite bourgeoisie and déclassé bourgeois or oligarchic strata that have become imbued with socialist ideas, organizational forms, culture, and so on. (Lenin was among the first to theorize this phenomenon in *What Is to Be Done?*) In this context, the relation of narrator and compiler in the production of a testimonio can function as an ideological figure or image of the possibility of union of a radicalized intelligentsia and the poor and working classes of a country. To put this another way, testimonio gives voice in literature to a previously “voiceless,” anonymous, collective popular-democratic subject, the *pueblo* or “people,” but in such a way that the intellectual or professional, usually of bourgeois or petit bourgeois background, is interpellated as being part of, and dependent on, the “people” without at the same time losing his or her identity as an intellectual. In other words, testimonio is not a form of liberal guilt. It suggests as an appropriate ethical and political response more the possibility of solidarity than of charity.<sup>22</sup>

The audience for testimonio, either in the immediate national or local

context or in metropolitan cultural centers, remains largely that reading public that in presocialist societies is still a partially gender- and class-limited social formation, even in the “advanced” capitalist democracies. The complicity a testimonio establishes with its readers involves their identification—by engaging their sense of ethics and justice—with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience. Testimonio in this sense has been important in maintaining and developing the practice of international human rights and solidarity movements. It is also a way of putting on the agenda, within a given country, problems of poverty and oppression, for example, in rural areas that are not normally visible in the dominant forms of representation.

The compiler of Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, was a Venezuelan social scientist living in Paris at the time she met Menchú, with all that implies about contradictions between metropolis and periphery, high culture and low culture, dominant and emergent social formations, dominant and subaltern languages. Her account of the relationship she developed with Menchú in the course of doing the testimonio forms the preface to the book, constituting a sort of testimonio about the production of a testimonio. One of the problems the two women encountered is that Menchú had to speak to Burgos-Debray in Spanish, the language for her of the ladinos or mestizos who oppressed her people, which she had just and very imperfectly learned (the conflict in Guatemala between Spanish and indigenous languages is in fact one of the themes of her narrative). In preparing the text, Burgos-Debray had to decide, then, what to correct and what not to correct in Menchú's recorded speech. She left in, for example, repetitions and digressions that she considered characteristic of oral narrative. On the other hand, she notes that she decided “to correct the gender mistakes which inevitably occur when someone has just learned to speak a foreign language. It would have been artificial to leave them uncorrected and it would have made Rigoberta look ‘picturesque’, which is the last thing I wanted.”<sup>23</sup>

One could speak here, in a way familiar from the dialectic of master and slave or colonizer and colonized, of the interlocutor manipulating or exploiting the material the informant provides to suit her own cosmopolitan political, intellectual, and aesthetic predilections. K. Millet makes the following argument, for example, about the testimonio of an indigenous woman, *Los sueños de Lucinda Nahuelhual*, compiled by the Chilean feminist activist Sonia Montecino Aguirre:

*Los sueños de Lucinda Nahuelhual* is not a narrative about a Mapuche Indian woman, but rather it is a textualizing of Ms. Sonia Montecino

Aguirre and her political sympathies. From the moment of the narrative's inception, the figure of "the other," Lucinda Nahuelhual, is only that, a figure, an empty signifier, a narration constructed on the significance of Ms. Aguirre's own political agenda. . . . the idea of "elevating" the Mapuche woman, Lucinda, to the status of a signifier of an urban feminist movement where power is maintained primarily within the hands of "enlightened" women from the hegemony requires that the indigenous woman accept a position of loss in order to signify meaning to her audience of "sisters."<sup>24</sup>

Because I have not read *Los sueños*, I cannot comment on the specifics of Millet's critique. But although it is true that there are possibilities of distortion and misrepresentation involved in testimonio, the argument here seems to reject the possibility of any textual representation of an "other" as such (all signifiers are "empty" unless and until they signify something for somebody) in favor of something like a (liberal?) notion of the irreducible particularity of the individual. In a situation such as that of Chile today, politically the question would seem not so much one of the differences in the social situations of the direct narrator and the interlocutor, but rather one of the possibility of their articulation together in a common program or front that at the same time would advance women's rights and the rights of the indigenous groups, without subordinating one to the other.

In the creation of the testimonial text, control of representation does not flow only one way, as Millet's argument implies: someone like Rigoberta Menchú is also in a sense exploiting her interlocutor in order to have her story reach and influence an international audience, something that, as an activist for her community, she sees in quite utilitarian terms as a political task. Moreover, editorial power does not belong to the compiler alone. Menchú, worrying, correctly, that there are some ways in which her account could be used against her or her people (for example, by academic specialists advising counterinsurgency programs such as the CIA set up in Guatemala), notes that there are certain things—her Nahuatl name, for example—she will not speak of: "I'm still keeping my Indian identity a secret. I'm still keeping secret what I think no one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets."<sup>25</sup> Although Burgos-Debray does the final selection and shaping of the text, the individual narrative units are wholly composed by Menchú and, as such, depend on her skills and intentionality as a narrator. An example of this may be found in the excruciating detail she uses (in chapters 24 and 27) to describe the torture

and murder of her mother and brother by the Guatemalan army, detail that gives the episodes a hallucinatory and symbolic intensity different from the matter-of-fact narration one expects from testimonio. One could say this is a kind of testimonial expressionism, or "magic realism."

Perhaps something like Mao's notion of "contradictions among the people" (as opposed to contradictions between "the people" as a whole and imperialism, as in the case of the Chinese war against Japanese occupation) expresses the nature of the narrator/compiler/reader relations in the testimonio, in the sense that there are deep and inescapable contradictions involved in these relations, contradictions that can be resolved only on the level of general structural change on both national and global levels. But there is also a sense of sisterhood and mutuality in the struggle against a common system of oppression. Testimonio is not, in other words, a reenactment of the anthropological function of the colonial or subaltern "native informant," about which Spivak, among others, has written. Hence, although one of the sources and models of the testimonio is undoubtedly the ethnographic "life history," it is not reducible to that category (nor, as noted earlier, to oral history).<sup>26</sup>

One fact that is evident in the passage from *I, Rigoberta Menchú* under discussion is that the presence of a "real" popular voice in the testimonio is at least in part an illusion. Obviously, we are dealing here, as in any discursive medium, with an effect that has been produced, in the case of a testimonio by both the direct narrator—using devices of an oral storytelling tradition—and the compiler, who, according to norms of literary form and expression, makes a text out of the material. Although it is easy to deconstruct this illusion, it is also necessary to insist on its presence to understand the testimonio's peculiar aesthetic-ideological power. Elzbieta Sklodowska, developing a point about the textual nature of testimonio that can be connected with the argument made by Millet, cautions that:

it would be naive to assume a direct homology between text and history. The discourse of a witness cannot be a reflection of his or her experience, but rather a refraction determined by the vicissitudes of memory, intention, ideology. The intention and the ideology of the author-editor further superimpose the original text, creating more ambiguities, silences, and absences in the process of selecting and editing the material in a way consonant with norms of literary form. Thus, although the testimonio uses a series of devices to gain a sense of veracity and authenticity—among them the point of view of the first-person witness-narrator—the play between fiction and history reappears inexorably as a problem.<sup>27</sup>

What is at stake, however, is the particular nature of the "reality effect" of the testimonio, not simply the difference between (any) text and reality. What is important about testimonio is that it produces, if not the real, then certainly a sensation of experiencing the real that has determinate effects on the reader that are different from those produced by even the most realist or "documentary" fiction. "More than an interpretation of reality," notes Jara in a useful corrective to Skłodowska's point, the testimonio is "a trace of the Real, of that history which, as such, is inexpressible."<sup>28</sup>

Skłodowska is right about the interplay between real and imaginary in testimonio. But to subsume testimonio under the category of literary fictionality is to deprive it of its power to engage the reader in the ways I have indicated here, to make of it simply another form of literature, as good as, but certainly no better than and not basically different from, what is already the case. This seems to me a formalist and, at least in effect, a politically liberal response to testimonio, which tolerates or encourages its incorporation into the academically sanctioned field of literature at the expense of relativizing its moral and political urgency.<sup>29</sup> What has to be understood, instead, is precisely how testimonio puts into question the existing institution of literature as an ideological apparatus of alienation and domination at the same time that it constitutes itself as a new form of literature.

Having said this much, however, I now need to distinguish testimonio from (1) that central form of nonfictional first-person narrative that is autobiography and cognate forms of personal narrative, such as memoirs, diaries, confessions, and reminiscences; and (2) Barbara Foley's articulation of the category of "documentary fiction" in *Telling the Truth*.<sup>30</sup> I will consider autobiography first, with the proviso that some of the forms of "documentary fiction" Foley considers are autobiographical or pseudoautobiographical. The dividing line between testimonio and autobiography is not always exact, but the following might represent the general case. Even in nineteenth-century memoirs of women or ex-slaves (that is, texts in which the narrator writes clearly from a position of subalternity), there is often implicit an ideology of individualism in the very convention of the autobiographical form, an ideology built on the notion of a coherent, self-evident, self-conscious, commanding subject who appropriates literature precisely as a means of "self-expression" and who 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. Because the authorial function has been erased or mitigated, the relationship between authorship and forms of individual and hierarchical power in bourgeois society has also changed. 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 marginalization, oppression, and struggle. If it loses this connection, it ceases to be testimonio and becomes autobiography, that is, an account of, and also a means of access to, middle- or upper-class status, a sort of documentary bildungsroman. If Rigoberta Menchú had become a "writer" instead of remaining as she has a member of, and an activist for, her ethnic community, her narration would have been an autobiography. By contrast, even where the subject is a person "of the left," as, for example, in Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of the Earth*, Leon Trotsky's *My Life*, or Pablo Neruda's *Memoirs*, autobiography and the autobiographical novel are essentially conservative modes in the sense that they imply that individual triumph over circumstances is possible in spite of "obstacles." Autobiography produces in the reader—who, generally speaking, is already either middle- or upper-class or expecting to be—the specular effect of confirming and authorizing his or (less so) her situation of relative social privilege. Testimonio, by contrast, even in the case of testimonios from the political right, such as Armando Valladares's prison memoir *Against All Hope* or Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability of the reader's world must be brought into question.<sup>31</sup>

As such, testimonio offers a kind of answer to the problem of women's access to literature. Sidonie Smith has argued that every woman who writes finally interrogates the ideology of gender that lies behind the engendering of self in forms such as the novel or autobiography.<sup>32</sup> She alludes to the notion that the institution of literature itself is phallogocentric. On the other hand, repressing the desire for power in order to avoid complicity with domination is a form of female self-effacement sanctioned by the patriarchy. How do we find forms of expression that break out of this double bind? Many of the best-known testimonios are in the voices of women, yet, because of the narrative situation I have identified, testimonio does not produce textually an essentialized "woman's experience." It is a self-conscious instance of what Spivak has advocated as "strategic essentialism" in feminist political practice.<sup>33</sup>

I am generally sympathetic with the project Barbara Foley has staked out in *Telling the Truth*. In particular, her deconstruction of what she

calls "the fact/fiction distinction" and her emphasis on the inevitable historicity of literary categories are useful for conceptualizing some aspects of the testimonio, including its peculiar truth claim on the reader. What Foley is not doing in *Telling the Truth*, however, is producing an account of testimonial narrative as such. Although some of the texts she discusses in her chapter on African American narrative are testimonios in the sense outlined here, Foley herself prefers to deal with them through the somewhat different category of the documentary novel. But this is to make of testimonio one of the mutations the novel has undergone in the course of its (European) evolution from the Renaissance on, whereas I have wanted to suggest that it implies a radical break (as in the structuralist notion of *coupure*) with the novel and with literary fictionality as such. In other words, the testimonio is not a form of the novel. It cannot be adequately theorized, therefore, by the sort of argument Foley develops, which is, nonetheless, very useful for understanding certain forms of fiction and fictionalized autobiography that depend on the semiotic intensification of a reality effect.<sup>34</sup>

If the novel is a closed and private form in the sense that both the story and the subject end with the end of the text, defining that auto-referential self-sufficiency that is the basis of formalist reading practices, the testimonio exhibits by contrast what René Jara calls a "public intimacy" (*intimidad pública*) in which the boundary between public and private spheres of life essential in all forms of bourgeois culture and law is transgressed.<sup>35</sup> The narrator in testimonio is a real person who continues living and acting in a real social history that also continues. Testimonio can never in this sense create the illusion of that textual in-itselfness that has been the basis of literary formalism, nor can it be adequately analyzed in these terms. It is, to use Umberto Eco's slogan, an "open work" that implies the importance and power of literature as a form of social action, but also its radical insufficiency.

In principle, testimonio appears therefore as an extraliterary or even antiliterary form of discourse. That, paradoxically, is precisely the basis of both its aesthetic and its political appeal. As Foley suggests, in literary history the intensification of a narrative or representational reality effect is generally associated with the contestation of the dominant system and its forms of cultural idealization and legitimation. This was certainly the case of the picaresque novel and *Don Quixote* in relation to the novels of chivalry in the Spanish Renaissance. What happens, however, when something like testimonio is appropriated by (or as) "literature"? Does this involve a neutralization of testimonio's peculiar aesthetic effect, which depends, as we have seen, precisely on its status outside accepted

literary forms and norms? In relation to these questions and the discussion of Foley above, I need finally to distinguish testimonio from the testimonial novel. Miguel Barnet calls his *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* a "testimonial novel" (*novela testimonio*), even though the story is nonfictional.<sup>36</sup> In so doing, he emphasizes how the material of an ethnographic "life history" can be made into literature. But I would rather reserve the term "testimonial novel" (or Capote's "nonfiction novel") for those narrative texts in which an "author" in the conventional sense has either invented a testimonio-like story or, as in the case of *In Cold Blood* (or Barnet's own later work, *Canción de Rachel*), extensively reworked, with explicitly literary goals (greater figurative density, tighter narrative form, elimination of digressions and interruptions, and so on), a testimonial account that is no longer present except in its simulacrum. If the picaresque novel was the pseudoautobiography of a lower-class individual (thus inverting a "learned" humanist form into a pseudopopular one), we might observe in recent literature (1) novels that are in fact pseudo-testimonios, inverting a form that grows out of subaltern experience into one that is middlebrow (an example might be the Mexican novel *Las aventuras, desaventuras y sueños de Adonis García: El vampiro de la Colonia Roma*, by Luis Zapata, which purports to be the testimonio of a homosexual prostitute); (2) a growing concern on the part of contemporary novelists to produce something like a testimonial "voice" in their fiction, with variable political intentions (for example, Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Story of Mayta* on the right, Manlio Argueta's *One Day of Life* on the left); and (3) a series of ambiguous forms located between the novel and testimonio as such (for example, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* or the very intriguing novel/memoir of the Cultural Revolution, Yang Jiang's *A Cadre School Life*, which is a testimonio rendered in the mold of a narrative genre of classical Chinese literature).

But if the testimonio comes into being necessarily at the margin of the historically given institution of literature, it is also clear that it is becoming a new postfictional form of literature, with significant cultural and political repercussions. To return to our starting point: if the novel had a special relationship with humanism and the rise of the European bourgeoisie, testimonio is by contrast a new form of narrative literature in which we can at the same time witness and be a part of the emerging culture of an international proletarian/popular-democratic subject in its period of ascendancy. But it would be in the spirit of testimonio itself to end on a more skeptical note: literature, even where it is infused with a popular-democratic form and content, as in the case of testimonio, is not itself a popular-democratic cultural form, and (pace Gramsci) it is an



open question as to whether it can ever be. How much of a favor do we do testimonio by positing, as here, that it has become a new form of literature or by making it an alternative reading to the canon (one track of the Stanford Western culture requirement now includes *I, Rigoberta Menchú*)? Perhaps such moves preempt or occlude a vision of an emergent popular-democratic culture that is no longer based on the institutions of humanism and literature.

(1989)

## 2

### “Through All Things Modern”: Second Thoughts on Testimonio



This is why Indians are thought to be stupid. They can't think, they don't know anything, they say. But we have hidden our identity because we needed to resist, we wanted to protect what governments have wanted to take away from us. They have tried to take our things away and impose others on us, be it through religion, through dividing up the land, through schools, through books, through radio, through all things modern.<sup>1</sup>

To situate the title and the quote: these are second thoughts both on the testimonio itself and on my own work on testimonio, represented by my essay “The Margin at the Center.”<sup>2</sup> I wrote there that by testimonio I understand a novel- or novella-length narrative told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real-life protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts. In recent years it has become an important, perhaps the dominant, form of literary narrative in Latin America. The best-known example available in English translation is the text that the passage above comes from, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the life story of a young Guatemalan indian woman, which, as she puts it in her presentation, is intended to represent “the reality of a whole people.”<sup>3</sup>