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“The (Potential?) Power of Testimonial Fiction:
Torture, Truth, and the Testimonial Novel”

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In his book Against Literature, John Beverley provides a comprehensive description of the components of the testimonio: it is the act of testifying or bearing witness; it is usually a longer written narrative; it is the story of a life or a "significant life experience" where the first person voice of the narrator has actually experienced the events that are recounted, but in a context where the experience is understood, either implicitly or explicitly, as collective; and there is usually at least one mediator involved -- a translator, an editor, a journalist (70-75). The genre of testimonio is presumably founded in fact, grounded in experience. What, though, are the implications for the testimonial impulse when it is translated into fiction?

Although the components of the testimonio as a genre have been extensively commented upon (Beverley is one of many scholars who have helped to construct its defining parameters), the genre characteristics of the testimonial novel remain blurry. Lucille Kerr notes the difficulties inherent in labeling testimonial fiction as she lists possible terms from a number of sources: documentary fiction, documentary narrative, documentary novel, testimonial literature, testimonial narrative, testimonial novel, novela-testimonio, narrativa de testimonio, novela testimonial, testimonio (Kerr 370). The problems in defining or delimiting the genre of testimonial fiction have to do, in part, with its location; it is situated in "fiction," yet is based upon or influenced by a factual incident which it retells. The testimonial novel does not always fit the established criteria Beverley has described. He indeed stresses repeatedly, and for good reason, that "*testimonio is not a form of the novel*" (154, emphasis in original). I agree, of course, but I rely on Beverley's begrudging admission that even if the testimonio is not a form of the novel, the testimonial novel is a form of testimonio. I want to insist on the importance of including the testimonial novel in considerations of testimonial literature because there is a shared goal: raising consciousness and building solidarity.

Beverley fails to include coming-to-consciousness in his criteria for the testimonio. Of course, not every testimonio describes the process of becoming conscientized (a term I steal from Paulo Freire). But many testimonios do, and in particular those of women: Rigoberta Menchu,

Maria Teresa Tula, Elvia Alvarado, just to name a few. Consciousness-raising, the process of coming-to-consciousness, is a bridge between the testimonio and the testimonial novel. It offers us a way to discuss both genres together that doesn't require a pointless and unwinnable debate about which one is more "True" or "Real." It avoids setting up a hierarchy which argues that the testimonio is "better" because it is "real," although Beverley and many others acknowledge that testimonio is, of course, a mediated representation of the real. It is, in fact, coming-to-consciousness - becoming politicized - that enables the very production or creation of both the testimonio and the testimonial novel.

Any joint discussion of testimonio and the testimonial novel raises significant questions and important issues: whether a text is considered fact or fiction often has a significant effect on its impact on a reader and, thus, on the effective functioning of the text. My intent is not to develop a fixed definition of the genre of the testimonial novel, not to create another rigid set of boundaries that enables the valorization of some texts and the devaluation of others. Although I agree with Doris Sommer that "generic labels are meaningful" when discussing testimonial literature and that such labels have political and ethical consequences ("Rigoberta's Secrets" 41), I want to focus instead on the consciousness-raising function of the testimonial novel.

There are many works of fiction that work as testimonial novels. In this paper I will concentrate on three: Julia Alvarez' In the Time of the Butterflies, Rosario Ferre's The House on the Lagoon, and Isabel Allende's Of Love and Shadows. Allende's novels are wonderful examples of fiction which speak to the reality of living under a dictatorship. However, it is her second novel, Of Love and Shadows, that is particularly relevant in the context of a discussion about consciousness-raising. The novel describes the coming-to-consciousness of Irene, a liberated woman from the upper-middle class who works as a journalist and is engaged to a career military man. It is Irene's class privilege that allows her initial blindness to the brutal repression in her country. She can disregard any evidence which counters the official interpretation of the dictatorship. Allende writes:

ignorance was the norm in her situation. . . . Irene had been educated to deny any unpleasantness, discounting it as a distortion of the facts (OLS 117).

As the novel develops, Allende makes clear the willful lack of awareness and tremendous privilege this denial or distortion entails. In an interesting coincidence, a review of one of Allende's other novels contains a chillingly exact description of some members of Irene's socio-

economic class. John Krich asserts, in a factually inaccurate and particularly mean-spirited evaluation of Allende's Eva Luna, that:

the time may have come for a swing back to a more mundane sort of storytelling. At this point, the most fantastical Latin Americans may be those who commute each morning to office jobs, worry about their car payments, follow the ball scores and the latest gringo fashions (Krich 14).

The irony is that this may in fact be a “fantastical” reality for much of Latin America, but only a certain class privilege and distance could suggest that it is “mundane.” At the beginning of Allende’s novel, Irene's mother Beatriz and Irene herself both inhabit the subjectivity of this “fantastical” Latin American, focused on self and unaware of the excesses and abuses that take place in their country. Sonia Rojas and Edna Rehbein suggest that it is the pairing of Beatriz' continuing refusal to recognize fact with Irene's enlightenment that make Irene's growth so remarkable: “Beatriz's systematic denial of the concrete violent reality opposes the awakening of Irene's social consciousness and search for truth” (Rojas and Rehbein 4).

Irene's awakening takes place in the company of her photographer/admirer and eventual lover, Francisco, who is quite politically aware and active in the underground. He is so frustrated by Irene's inability to acknowledge the situation in their country (unnamed in the novel, but clearly Chile), that “he was tempted to take her by the shoulders and shake her until her feet touched the ground and she opened her eyes to the truth” (OLS 77). The catalyst for Irene's coming-to-consciousness is Francisco's and Irene's joint search for Evangelina Ranquileo, a “disappeared” woman, whose dead body is found in a clandestine grave. Francisco notes that Irene begins to change as they continue on their journey toward the truth about Evangelina's death. He “understood that Irene was losing her innocence, and that nothing could prevent her now from beginning to see the truth” (OLS 113). And Irene is “filled with a new determination born of her desire to know the truth” (OLS 115). Irene has become conscientized.

Allende intends her book to serve the same consciousness-raising purpose as Irene's pseudo-fictional journey does. For Allende:

writing is an act of hope, . . . The writer of good will carries a lamp to illuminate the dark corners. Only that, nothing more -- a tiny beam of light to show some hidden aspect of reality, to help decipher and understand it and thus to initiate, if

possible, a change in the conscience of some readers ("Writing" 48-9).

Of Love and Shadows conscientizes its reader as the consciousness-raising process is embodied in Irene; this testimonial novel serves a consciousness-raising function. The need for a raised consciousness is pointed out even more explicitly when we read that Professor Leal, Francisco's father, feels there must be "an awakened people who become aware of their rights and their strengths" (OLS 203) - suggesting the necessity of transferring Irene's experience to the broader population for meaningful change to occur. In the novel, a strategy for dealing with the existence of the bodies in the mines is determined: "The best solution was to shout the news from the rooftops, to send it echoing around the world, awakening consciences and shaking the very foundations of the nation" (OLS 215). This is in fact what Allende has done in her novel.

Julia Alvarez, in the postscript to her novel, has a similar motive: she writes on behalf of Dominicans, to share their history with others, so that her "book deepens North Americans' understanding of the nightmare you endured and the heavy losses you suffered" (324). Although accepting self-constructed statements of authorial intent is inherently problematic, these novels and their authors' commentary all help confirm that at least one function of the testimonial novel is its service in a project of consciousness-raising. But there is another problem.

In Allende's novel, after Irene and Francisco find Evangelina's raped and tortured body in the mines, they wish they could "turn time back to the moment before they had known the truth; as if they could again live innocently in a radiant reality" (OLS 193). They forget the situation long enough to make passionate love, but in the morning "they remembered the corpse in the mine and were catapulted into reality" (OLS 197). In the context of a reader's coming-to-consciousness, this is perhaps too close for comfort. Many of Allende's readers can turn back time; they have the privilege of ignoring the truth of her novel, choosing to forget Evangelina's corpse and the other dead bodies.

It might be just this danger that Beverley warns against when he suggests that one significant difference between the testimonial novel and the testimonio is that testimonio allows for a closer relationship (Beverley calls it complicity) "between narrator and reader than is possible in the novel, which . . . usually entails an ironic distancing on the part of both novelist and reader from the fate of the protagonist" (77). It is this observation of Beverley's that brings me to a crucial question.

The incident in Allende's novel is based on an event which occurred in Chile a few years after the 1973 military coup, when the bodies of 15 "disappeared" peasants were found buried in an abandoned mine. Alvarez' novel is based on what she calls "Trujillo's thirty-one-year depotism" (324). Ferre's novel engages debates over Puerto Rican statehood and independence and the often-violent resistance to opposing political positions. If a reader doesn't know that the presence and discovery of the bodies in the mines is real, of the existence of the dictator Trujillo, of the conflicted nature of Puerto Rican citizenship, what does that do to the possibility of her or his consciousness being raised, of being awakened to the political situation in Puerto Rico, Chile, the Dominican Republic, or other Latin American and Caribbean countries?

The implications of this question are specifically addressed in Ferre's novel. When Quintin finally gives in to his impulse to let his wife Isabel know he knows about the clandestine manuscript she is writing, he writes her this note:

If you permit me, I'll add my version of the story here. It's different from yours, because it's based on facts. But, at this point, who can tell fact from fiction in this manuscript? For someone who never lived in Ponce, both versions could be true" (190).

Lacking background knowledge, presumably the reader would understand these incidents and settings as fictional and might, as Beverley suggests, feel distanced from the protagonists and their fate. Quintin employs this strategy himself when, upset about perceived inaccuracies in Isabel's novel, he "decided the best thing was to create a distance between what he was reading and his own personal feelings" (107). What effect does the possibility of this distancing have on the consciousness-raising function of the testimonial novel? What indeed are the truth effects of the testimonial novel?

Lucille Kerr suggests that the testimonial novel is a "type of disguise" (382). It is the truth disguised as fiction. As "a demonstration of the possibilities for presenting the truth" (Kerr 383), it makes explicit the existence of more than one possibility for this presentation. However Kerr also comments that:

authors of testimonial novels seem to be called upon, either by private necessity or public demand, to give further testimony about the materials that have shaped the texts

that bear their names, texts that presumably tell a self-evident truth (387).

Here Kerr suggests the existence of a need to *prove* the truth of the novel through evidentiary documents -- a demand that has been made of authors of the testimonio as well (Logan 206). Allende includes no contextualizing materials, no background documents, with her novel. Yet her public statements have consistently emphasized the factual nature of her portrayal of the discovery of the bodies in the mine. In a 1992 interview Allende observes:

I think of that book as a long reportage. I researched every detail very carefully; in fact I had started collecting my material as early as 1978. So the story was there (Queen's Quarterly 624).

She stresses her accurate representation of the truth again in another interview:

My second novel, Of Love and Shadows, is based on a case that actually happened in Chile. Everything in the book was researched; everything is true. But, of course, it's presented as fiction, as a novel, and now I cannot tell you which of the characters is invented and which belongs to reality. I can tell you exactly where the bullets were in the bodies and how the bodies were found. These things I can say are true as I described them (Points of Departure 112).

Julia Alvarez also emphasizes her intensive research and the factual basis of her novel. But is exhaustive research the definitive measure of a truth? Linda Alcoff asserts that the "validity" of a statement cannot be determined "by asking whether or not the speaker has done sufficient research to justify her claims" (104). Lynn Stephen notes that "measuring testimonials against empirically oriented anthropology is not the most useful way to evaluate them" (229).

The truth value of the testimonial novel is important. Kerr alleges, in fact, that contextualizing knowledge may serve to "remind us of the testimonial novel's (and also its author's) responsibility to try to tell the truth" (388). But the point in examining Of Love and Shadows or any other testimonial novel is not to engage in a nitpicking quest to painstakingly determine which pieces are true and which are not. Allende herself has said, in regard to this novel, "I no longer know what is true, what is not" (Confluencia 103). Instead, the testimonial novel raises these critical questions of "truth" -- what is truth, what is reality,

and who has the power to decide or enforce versions of truth. Testimonial novels offer revisionist history, alternative knowledges, but within a genre traditionally identified with "fiction" - thus implicitly not "fact." Debra Castillo contemplates the possible irrelevance of these boundaries when she asks: "Of what significance are traditional distinctions between 'fact' and 'fiction?'" (251).

The power dynamics involved in how determinations of fact and fiction are made are laid out in the work of Michel Foucault through the concept of the "*insurrection of subjugated knowledges*" (81, emphasis in original), which he describes as both a resurrection of "buried" information and a reclaiming of:

a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity (82).

This is an especially apt place to position the testimonial novel. Locating the testimonial novel in the category of subjugated knowledges allows us to make visible its contribution to issues of who gets to decide what is history and what is fiction, to include it in what Foucault has termed "*a historical knowledge of struggles*" (83, emphasis in original), constituted by:

the claims to attention of local, discontinuous, disqualified, illegitimate knowledges against the claims of a unitary body of theory which would filter, hierarchise and order them in the name of some true knowledge (83).

What types of knowledge get discounted in any hierarchy of truth? And, what, or whom, might be invested in their disqualification? What is "at stake" in using fiction to oppose the "effects of the knowledge and power that invests" history (Foucault 87)?

The strategies of colonial powers in erasing specific versions of history are well known. Minerva, one of the Mirabal sisters whose stories Alvarez recounts, tells us that after Trujillo seizes power, "we were issued new history textbooks with a picture of you-know-who embossed on the cover so even a blind person could tell who the lies were all about" (24). In *The House on the Lagoon*, Isabel observes that:

The history of the United States was taught thoroughly at their school, yet Puerto Rican history was never mentioned. In the nuns' view, the island *had* no history. In this they

were not exceptional; it was forbidden to teach Puerto Rican history at the time, either at private or at public schools. Can history be so dangerous as to be revolutionary? (91, emphasis in original).

One answer is, of course, that in some cases the terms "history" and "revolutionary" are indeed inseparable. Often one ability challenged by revolutionary forces is the ability of the oppressive power regimes to define what constitutes history. The "power of hegemonic discourse" (Kaminsky 111) occurs through the ability to create "history" as "true." Quintin confirms his belief in the conflation of the object constructed as History and "the Truth," and the comparable impotence of literature, when he says to Isabel:

"Literature is fluid, . . . like life itself. History, on the other hand, is something very different. It is also an art, but it deals with the truth. As a record of human endeavors, history is unalterable. A novelist may write lies, but a historian never can. Literature never changes anything, but history can alter the course of events" (311).

Foucault tells us that power never ceases to pursue truth (93). It is this incessant pursuit of what is decided to be the "truth" that can be invoked against the effectivity of the testimonial novel. The equation of an official version of "history" with incontrovertible "truth" opens up a place of intervention for those in a position to control the dissemination of information. If the power of a testimonial novel to raise consciousness and thus effect change can be deterred by an insistence that one determine what pieces of it are "true" or not in order to establish its value, what then is subverted, silenced, muted, discouraged?

It is necessary to consider for a moment how the "effects of truth are produced within discourses" (Foucault 118). Foucault sketches the process:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned (131, emphasis added).

"Truth" becomes an object produced, transmitted, and controlled by a political apparatus, which writes it into existence through "the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and

specific effects of power attached to the true" (Foucault 132). In this sense, the testimonial novel participates in:

the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. . . . of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time (Foucault 133).

Linda Alcoff writes that "whether something is *taken* as true . . . presupposes a particular conception of truth, one in which the truth of a statement can be distinguished from its interpretation and acceptance" (103, emphasis in original). Quintin embodies this attitude: "There was a true and a false, a right and a wrong in his mind" (106). In order for a total dependence on history to be credible, there must be the existence of a corresponding belief in an independent, verifiable truth and the possibility of acquiring that truth. The testimonial novel intervenes in any monolithic conferral of the status of "truth" on "history" and the consequent privileging of it over literature and fiction. The testimonial novel embodies resistance to this untenable separation. Georg Gugelberger suggests that testimonial literature represents:

a strong desire to correct official history which is history by those who have the power to make history . . . [and] is, perhaps, the lasting contribution of the new genre on the border between fiction and faction (4-5).

Although Gugelberger seems to be referring to the *testimonio*, it is the testimonial novel which sits more clearly on this border.

In an interview published in Contemporary Literature, Allende says "I'm always trying to portray reality" (595). In the same interview, she also states "fiction is lying" (598) and "it is as if by this lying-in-fiction you discover little things that are true about yourself, about life, about people, about how the world works" (599). This complicated and almost contradictory attitude pervades the testimonial novel. It's a very complex blending of truth/literature/history/fiction/imagination/reality, and Rosario Ferre makes clear that the distinctions between these categories are based on who is doing the defining. One of Ferre's reviewers states:

A skeptical Latin and a feminist, Ms. Ferre doesn't believe in facts. In her view, there are only versions of the truth, and the official version is often imposed by force (Rute 28).

Ferre's metanarrative contributes to the debate over the characteristics of history and literature as Isabel writes her memoir in the form of a novel,

appalling Quintin because she "had altered everything. She was manipulating history for fiction's sake" (71). Quintin prides himself on his training in history, glorying in the superiority of history over literature:

On the other hand, all writers interpreted reality in their own way -- and that was why Quintin preferred history to literature; literature wasn't ethical enough for him. There were limits to interpretation, even if the borders of reality were diffuse and malleable. There was always a nucleus of truth, and it was wrong to alter it. That was why Quintin didn't consider writing a serious occupation, like science or history (Ferre 72).

Isabel strongly objects to this hierarchization:

"History doesn't deal with the truth any more than literature does. From the moment a historian selects one theme over another in order to write about it, he is manipulating the facts. The historian, like the novelist, observes the world through his own tinted glass, and describes it as if it were the truth. But it's only one side of the truth, because imagination -- what you call lies -- is also a part of the truth. Like the dark side of the moon, it's no less real because it can't be seen" (Ferre 312).

Elias Munoz suggests that one difference between a testimonial novel and other testimonial discourse is the artistic elaboration or fictional rewriting of that which is documentable (Munoz 62). That which is documentable; not that which is necessarily documented in the novel. Lillian Manzor-Coats concurs, writing that "testimonials approximate historical discourse in the sense that it is possible to corroborate the referential value of discourse" (160). That it is possible to corroborate. Now, I am not suggesting that we lose ourselves in an extremist postmodern absence of referentiality; I am not arguing that empirical reality is irrelevant. Linda Alcoff condemns the hypocrisy in that approach:

A very radical revision of what we mean by truth is in order, but if we ignore the ways in which our discourses appeal to some version of truth for their persuasiveness, we are in danger of remaining blind to the operations of legitimation that function within our own texts. The task is therefore to explicate the relations between politics and knowledge rather than pronounce the death of truth (117).

I am insisting, though, that truth effects are not unilaterally determined by a proven or provable correspondence between a statement and the empirical reality it purports to represent. I am saying more than just: there is truth in fiction, or the testimonial novel has a truth value. The issue is how what is determined to be "true" is constructed, by whom and for what purposes; how it is received; and what effect it ultimately has.

John Beverley has objected to the fictionalization of the testimonio because it reinforces a privileging of literature "as a norm of expression" (76); it might imply the testimonio had less value (less cultural capital?) than the more "literary" testimonial novel. What is paradoxical here is that most discussions of "testimonial literature" equate that very term with the testimonio, but exclude the testimonial novel. Beverley also argues that to broaden our notion of "Literature" to include testimonio is not necessarily a positive move, since it might reduce testimonio's oppositional possibilities. Lillian Manzor-Coats anticipates Beverley's argument when she writes of the testimonio that:

what testimonials share in common is their desire to expose literature as complicit with other institutions of domination and power while at the same time offer an alternative (antiliterary? postfictional?) outside of literature's patriarchal hierarchies (169).

This assertion that the incorporation of the testimonio into Literature serves the interests of the hegemony is an example of Foucault's theory of power circulation where:

the particular elements of the knowledge that one seeks to disinter are no sooner accredited and put into circulation, than they run the risk of re-codification, re-colonisation (86).

Amy Kaminsky phrases it like this:

Oppositional writing is produced within a context or a series of shifting contexts that make its reception especially problematic, since it is always in danger of being reincorporated by the dominant mode (108).

These reincorporation processes, the attempts to control the knowledges produced by writings, also affect (or are directed toward) the testimonial novel, where they work by saying: "You are Literature, thus you cannot

be Truth. You can be ignored or valorized, but you cannot be True. You can be discounted."

Allende herself reinforces and condones this aesthetization of the testimonial novel in ways I consider counterproductive. She comments that:

Right after the military coup in 1973 there was a wave of testimonial literature by the people who had suffered the repression directly. . . . It took several years to internalize that suffering, and transform it into art (Confluencia 97).

Here again we have a distinction between testimonial literature and the testimonial novel. Allende's allegation unfortunately reinforces exactly the hierarchies to which Beverley and Manzor-Coats are objecting -- that testimonio is not literature, that testimonial novels are literature, that Literature is Art, and testimonios are not. It is exactly this attitude against which I argue. Michel Foucault promotes an attitude of flexibility in this regard when he suggests that, "it has become possible to develop lateral connections across different forms of knowledge and from one focus of politicisation to another" (127). Lateral, not hierarchical. Doris Sommer echoes this strategy:

The trick is not to identify the correct discourse . . . and to defend it with dogmatic heroism, but to combine, recombine and continue to adjust the constellation of discourses in ways that will respond to a changeable reality ("Rigoberta's Secrets" 45).

The testimonial novel is engaged in a project of "genre destabilization" (Kaplan 122), a project which:

propose[s] an alternative epistemology derived from rejection of conventional truth claims, now revealed as problematic social constructions (Castillo 256).

It contributes to what Michelle Joffroy suggested (at a conference last week) is a "theory of representing the real." The subversive strategy invoked by the testimonial novel is to take subjugated knowledges and insert them into Literature, thus blurring the boundaries between the traditional separations of history and literature, fact and fiction, testimonio and the testimonial novel. Rather than seeing the testimonial novel as fiction, and thus less valuable than the presumably more empirically based testimonio; rather than seeing the testimonial novel as fiction, and thus artistically and aesthetically more valuable than the

testimonio; I suggest we see them as partners in resistance. I do not want to see the testimonial novel wearing a crown of Literary Eminence to which the testimonio cannot aspire. I do not want to privilege the "fictional" representation of the novel over the representations contained in the testimonio. But to devalue the testimonial novel because it fails to provide the seemingly unmediated access to the "real" that the testimonio pretends to is to ignore the way that both these genres participate in a project of consciousness raising. Their joint project promotes solidarity between those who can tell about the reality of living daily with the possibility of being "disappeared," and those who will read these stories.

The issue of possible solidarity is the next vital point. What are readers to do after reading a testimonial novel? Here is a fruitful moment for exploring what Doris Sommer calls the "the promising but underdeveloped place where reader response meets political imperatives" ("Taking" 920). Lillian Manzor-Coats proposes that the reader:

is meant to experience the events recounted as real. The voice who bears witness engages the reader's sense of justice thus producing an identification with a situation/cause that would otherwise be very distant (162).

The desired reader response is one that raises consciousness, that politicizes, that outrages the reader. The testimonial novel is a weapon in the struggle for social change.

Isabel Allende believes it is her job as a writer to evoke reader response in a way that highlights her political intent. In an interview published in The Kenyon Review, Allende maintains:

we cannot ignore reality. . . . We bear the *responsibility* to know! And I know, as a writer, I bear the responsibility to tell you and convince you that all this is happening. Now what are you going to do with that truth? (118, emphasis in original).

"What are you going to do with the truth?" What a challenge to the reader! What is the reader of the testimonial novel supposed to do with the truth, or the possibility of truth, she or he has newly discovered at this intersection of response and politics? When Dede Mirabal begins to understand the politics of her country she is amazed:

"How could she have missed so much before?" she asked herself. But then a harder question followed: "What was she going to do about it now that she did know?" (75).

Ferre does not answer this question. One reviewer, Edward Rivera, writes that Ferre "is too good a writer to supply solutions to the issues she raises -- that's up to the reader" (5). Now, I am certainly not brave enough to attempt what Ferre is excused from. But Doris Sommer helps here as well when she rejects an empathetic response to testimonial literature, noting that "empathy, after all, is a denial of differences" (925). It is precisely the differences that exist between the conditions described in the testimonio and the testimonial novel, and their (often privileged North American) readers that drives the need to find a multiplicity of ways to include testimonio and testimonial novels in the reading experience. When I taught Rigoberta Menchu's testimonio in a literature course, my students' reactions were twofold. Some of them told me the work was "boring" !!! The rest felt pity for Menchu -- in a kind of diffuse and distanced way. "Poor Rigoberta," they said. "No one should have to go through that." Now, I'm not entirely sure whether their comments are a reflection of their own unwillingness to engage, or some ineffectivity on my part. I want to suggest, though, that it is not impossible to suspect that the reaction students have to reading what is clearly a textual event in a novel -- possibly perceived as a safer or more appropriate place for strong response -- might be sustained when they are forced to recognize its connection to a historical event. It might, at least, remove their apparent need to sympathize abstractly with an individual, and allow broader political and social implications to be considered. Julia Alvarez proposes that perhaps Trujillo and his dictatorship -- or other similar situations -- "can only finally be understood by fiction, only finally be redeemed by the imagination" (324). I don't agree that they can "only" be understood by fiction; I do think fiction may allow additional or different understandings.

Again, my goal is not to privilege the testimonial novel over the testimonio. As educators, we need to create conditions that allow testimonial literature, in all its manifestations, to serve what Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney have defined as its mission: the participation in "a learning process which leads to action improving social relations" (9). This is not to say that merely reading, or having our students read, testimonio or testimonial novels as a way to raise their consciousness will necessarily lead to social change. But it creates "the condition of possibility for coalitional politics ("Rigoberta's Secrets" 48). It is, at the very least, a necessary step.

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