

Transnationalism and *Testimonio* in Contemporary Central American Migrant Literature

*Este artículo explora la literatura centroamericana contemporánea que trata el transnacionalismo en las narrativas de migrantes de la región dentro del marco de la literatura testimonial. Los elementos transnacionales en los textos literarios leídos como testimonios también estaban presentes en narraciones latinoamericanas anteriores, pero fueron ignorados en los escritos críticos sobre este género. Estos elementos a menudo incluían dos países, así como la transmisión y la negociación continua entre diferentes idiomas. Además, la traducción inmediata de los textos al inglés los hizo más accesibles al público internacional que a los ciudadanos de los países donde tienen lugar los textos en su mayoría. Partiendo de las narrativas *Odyssey to the North* de Mario Bencastro y *The Tattooed Soldier* de Héctor Tobar como puntos de referencia, argumentaré que estas y otras ficciones centroamericanas contemporáneas se pueden leer como testimonio. Estos trabajos centran la atención en las repercusiones de la guerra civil y describe la migración a los Estados Unidos.*

Palabras clave: *testimonio, literatura centroamericana, narrativas de migrantes, transnacionalismo*

*This article explores contemporary Central American literature dealing with transnationalism in migrant narratives from the region within the framework of testimonio. The transnational elements in literary texts read as testimonio were also present in previous Latin American narratives but were ignored in critical writing about this genre. These elements often included two countries, and involved transmission of, as well as continuous negotiation between, different languages. Moreover, the immediate translation of these texts into English made them available more to an international audience than to the citizens of the countries in which they were mostly set. Taking *Odyssey to the North* by Mario Bencastro, and *The Tattooed Soldier* by Hector Tobar as my point of reference, I will argue that these and several other contemporary Central American works of fiction can be read as testimonio. These works, by focusing attention on the repercussions of the civil war in a new context, depict migration to the United States.*

Keywords: *testimonio*, *Central American Literature*, *migrant narratives*, *transnationalism*

This article explores the contemporary Central American literature of transnational migration within the framework of *testimonio*. *Testimonio*, as an approach in Latin America, can be traced back to the colonial period. For me, *testimonio* is, above all, a perspective from which to read a literary text: it is one way (among many) to understand or interpret a particular text. Thus, a text approached as *testimonio* contains literary elements as much as literature contains testimonial elements. Reading literary texts as *testimonio* not only bridges many dichotomies (like fact and fiction, truth and falsity) but also links the past and the present Central American social situation. *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;¹ 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 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 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 (*testimonios* of the eighties and nineties), as these will guide us to understand better both the present narratives as *testimonio* and the contemporary Central American situation.

From that perspective, we need to broaden our understanding of *testimonio*, refusing to confine our definition of the genre to overdetermined factors such as solidarity, struggle, or verisimilitude, and consider *testimonio* as an *approach* towards narratives and *not* a narrative itself. This approach, then, will not only revive *testimonio* once again but also help us in connecting the past with the present, particularly now after the peace agreement in Guatemala and El Salvador.² Contemporary fiction not just addresses injustices but also maintains its subversive nature.³ Today's texts may not depict the war, but they describe its repercussions and impact on common people and therefore they can be read as *testimonio*.

One such significant repercussion of the past (civil wars) in the present is migration.⁴ In this article, 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 traveling to the 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 highlighting the connection between the past and the present. Nevertheless, there were transnational elements in the classic texts read as *testimonio*: for instance, 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 more to an international audience than to the citizens of the countries in which they were notionally set. But this transnationalism had continually to be denied by the genre's readers and critics. Indeed, this was a constitutive tension inasmuch 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/author of what has come to stand as the definitive *testimonio*, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*:

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. (Levinson 44)

Yet this transnational aspect of classic *testimonio* can be seen not only in *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, which was narrated to Elizabeth Burgos-Debray in France but also in *Miguel Mármol*, narrated to Roque Dalton in Czechoslovakia; *Let me Speak*, narrated by Domitila Barrios de Chungara, partly in Mexico and partly in Bolivia, to Moema Viezzer; and *The Little School*, written by the Argentine Alicia Partnoy once she was in the United States. All these accounts were initially narrated or written in Spanish and then translated into English.

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 first, to the genocide or the violent oppression carried out by Latin American authoritarian governments, and then, to community resistance struggle and solidarity led by the leftist parties against such dictatorships. Jon 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, he 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*" (Beasley-Murray, *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 the discussion of the testimonial genre raises uncomfortable questions that would eventually come to mark its apparent downfall. Was *testimonio* really (as critics such 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 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 states: "Though *testimonio* is presented as the *cri de coeur* of the oppressed, ... it becomes the means by which a committed intelligentsia seeks to resolve its own sense of isolation and affliction" (*Posthegemony* 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. (10)

Thus, *testimonio* arguably became either a medium to help some intellectuals overcome their "isolation and affliction" or "sacred texts" that could not (even, should not) be read 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, diverting the discussion so far restricted to utopian conceptions of solidarity, or even communism, to other areas. We might wonder about the impact that narration-in-exile about the atrocities committed in the 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, communism, 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 extensively, *testimonio* as a reading phenomenon may gain a new life. Thus, I propose to read contemporary Central American fiction as *testimonio*, focusing particularly on their 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, while also noting the significant differences between then and now.

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 independently of *testimonio* as a genre, but *testimonio* as a reading strategy. Such a shift from genre to the 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 *testimonio* and contemporary Central American fiction that become most apparent. Both, for example, deal with two countries (the narrator generally speaks from a foreign land about his/her native place) and are often either written in or translated into English immediately. However, the contemporary works of fiction 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. The contemporary texts address the consequences of the civil war – migration and new struggles – that the immigrants experience.

Post-war narratives from the region describe the difficult and dangerous journey that Central Americans undertake to flee their

respective countries and reach the United States. And once there, they often do not fit well within established categories: Arturo Arias notes that “it was the civil wars of the 1980s that created the model described by Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, in which 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’” (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 challenge that a new place, new culture, and a new language pose to them, and on the other, the political and social situation that forced them to leave their respective countries. These works of fiction 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)” (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 the Central Americans or the Central American-Americans within the community well. He is concerned about the invisibility not just 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.⁵ 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 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.⁶

In what follows, I discuss diverse transnational aspects of Central American literature read as *testimonio*: migration, especially to the United States, and language and translation. *Testimonio* deals with 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 accessible to readers globally rather than limiting it solely to Hispanic readers. Furthermore, these narratives involve two countries – the protagonist’s native country and the one to which they migrate – and offer an insight into the 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 here are Mario Bencastro's *Odyssey to the North* (1999) and Hector Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998). These literary texts raise not only issues related to obstacles that Central American immigrants face in the United States, but also describe the social unrest in their native countries. Post-war fiction begins when the immigrants are already in the United States, and then goes back to their past to give the reader an idea of their background that has forced them to migrate to a foreign land. However, most of the narration is done 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 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 narratives, if read as *testimonio*, will not only help to revive the genre but also offer continuity with the past. The texts focus on the repercussion of the war – new issues that have emerged – as well as the continuation of life, irrespective of political turmoil.

MIGRATION

Migration is one of the most important transnational elements: it is the journey across national borders that sets up the transnational context. In classic *testimonio*, 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" (Menchú 242). 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 necessarily revolutionaries like in earlier texts. They are common people doing odd jobs to survive.

The immigrants in 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 easy entry into the United States and they are not always legal migrants. Many arrive without legal documents, unlike the revolutionaries in exile who entered legally and always aimed to go back to their countries. These illegal immigrants, on the other hand, aim to stay in the United States and do not plan to return to their 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 and resistance, and they have the leeway to be more critical about the repercussions of insurrection or civil war. They highlight the experience of migration: how the migrants get to the United States and what they do there is as important as the fact of crossing the border itself. Mario Bencastro's, *Odyssey to the North*, for instance, depicts the life of the Central and Latin American people 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 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:

[t]he *coyotes* 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. (Benecastro 29)

These contemporary works of fiction, thus, have testimonial characteristics that 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 hardships he endures there as 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 does not deal with the process of reaching the United States; rather, it centers on the difficulty that the protagonist faces once there and his attempts to come to terms with and an unpleasant past, in the foreign land. 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. 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 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.

ARRIVAL IN THE U.S. AND LIFE THEREAFTER

The contemporary narratives 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 contemporary texts 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 Calixto states 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" (Benecastro 19). In El Salvador, Calixto used to work on construction sites. He moved to the city from the village in search of a better life, after the village had been destroyed in the war between the army and rebel forces (12). Later, he had to leave his country because of 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 United States, he found 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 novel seeks 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.

These stories further depict the odd jobs that illegal immigrants do simply to survive once they reach the United States. For instance, in *The Tattooed Soldier*, Antonio works as a bus boy, a dishwasher, and "cut lawns and planted flowers for strangers" (Tobar 50). In *Odyssey to the North*, Calixto initially works as a painter who was 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 "[m]aybe I should go bother that Armenian guy again. If that guy paid me my money then we wouldn't have to stay here" (Tobar 49). 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 the right to fight for the wages that were not paid. These aspects of exploitation 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, and victimhood at the hands of powerful

people continue to exist. Can we then say, as John Beverley puts it, that “the moment of *testimonio* is over” (77)?

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 prefer to conceal their real identity. 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. (Tobar 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.

INCLUSION OF TWO NATIONS

These contemporary fictional works, 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 a foreign country, depicting their present situation, and then goes back to their past life in their native countries. The description of the 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, as well as 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; readers can thus compare their life as lived in different nations. In classic *testimonio*, by contrast, the

immediate presence 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 *testimonio* readings of the eighties and nineties where the narrator chronicles her or his past, here the reader is introduced to Antonio's past through another's eyes, Elena's. Elena was a carefree, strong-headed 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" (Tobar 84). The first impression she had 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 a pretty woman around" (87). She thought 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 making public speeches; rather, he is involved with the literary journal of the university, *Provocaciones*. Also, during conversations 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 opinion 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 life both in the United States and in Central American countries, 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 came to the United States with big dreams, such as studying literature at UCLA, though he could not 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" (Benecastro 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" (Tobar 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 came 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 accepted 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 the North American culture and intend to settle permanently. In *Odyssey to the North*, Calixto casually says "Juancho" when referring to his co-worker in the restaurant where both are dishwashers. 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! (Benecastro 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" (Benecastro 137). Whereas, 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 in his conversation: "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 texts demonstrate is the heterogeneity of such stories – while some migrants try to become a part of the North by changing their names and by 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 try to negotiate their identity in their new environment.

Contemporary Central American migrant stories, when read as *testimonio*, challenge the canonization of the 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 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 interpreted 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.

LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION

Language has played an important role in texts considered as *testimonio* ever since the genre came into existence. For example, the account 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: internationally, 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 Mayan people. 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” (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” (217). However, when Antonio travels to the North his dominant position as a speaker of Spanish 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” (Tobar 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” (Bencastro 47). The coyotes also tell them to think like Mexicans and “to talk with that accent, that sing-song voice Mexicans speak with” (47).

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” (Tobar 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.

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?” (Tobar 4). Language, translation, and the way meaning changes with a shift in the surroundings 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 perceiving a text as *testimonio*? Do they not get “lost in translation” by the narrator who struggles with two languages to express herself or himself, and by the translator who then translates it into a third language? Can we then read them more as literature than only factual and truthful accounts? Do these texts “truly” convey the narrator’s thoughts to the listener? If so, why did the classic *testimonio*, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* become the focus of attention for lies and manipulation, and trigger such a controversy?⁷ 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” (116). Are “authenticity,” and “verifiability” then, a factor 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 they fulfill their discourse in the United States 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 medium for telling stories. Nevertheless, characters in these works 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’” (Tobar 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 a popular genre 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* was written in English, while *Odysey 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. 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, molding 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” (Masiello 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.

The transnationalism of the testimonial genre was as evident in the eighties as much as today. However, this is but one of the many aspects of the genre that were overlooked, as critical discussion primarily focused on the subaltern voice, oppression, and resistance against the state authority. As Brett Levinson states: “Comprehension of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, these analyses suggest, hinge[d] less on a close reading than on one’s capacity to feel for or even *like* the Guatemalan indigenous people who have suffered. Interpretation, reading itself, and *understanding* (both in its epistemological and in its emotional sense) are questions of affect, empathy, or commiseration” (38). We should re-consider 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 article 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*; it demonstrates the need to pay attention to such themes that are part of the story and add to the discussion of texts. 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. (268)

We have seen how migration and the comparison of different nations can be read as *testimonio*. These topics are transnational as they are not limited to characters’ native countries (as we have seen) and can be related globally. At the same time, each fiction is different (though we find some common threads between them); each has a unique story and can be read differently. Thus, testimonial reading need not be homogeneous as it once was but can “[tend] to proliferation” (Beasley-Murray 268). The contemporary Central American texts discussed here are examples of the possibility of heterogeneous reading of *testimonio* that keeps the testimonial reading strategy alive and connects past with the present. They further show that not everything has been resolved with the end of civil

war and the signing of peace agreements but there are new stories that should be heard.

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NOTES

- 1 John Beverley mentions “This is perhaps the best way to confront the circumstance that the moment of testimonio is over” (*On the Politics of Truth*, 77). Elsewhere, Georg M. Gugelberger also states “Obviously the euphoric ‘moment’ of the testimonio has passed” (*The Real Thing*, 1).
- 2 In El Salvador, the peace agreement was signed in 1992, and in Guatemala in 1996. However, many critics such as Alexandra Ortiz Wallner and Arturo Arias (in *El arte de ficcionar* 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.
- 3 By contemporary fiction, I mean fiction in the wake of the peace processes in El Salvador and Guatemala which led to final agreements.
- 4 The Central American countries (particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala) during the late twentieth century faced military repression and civil war, as this period saw the rise of guerrilla movements and other forms of resistance against State oppression. For instance, in Guatemala, Rigoberta Menchú’s successful *testimonio*, titled *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. However, there are of course differences in the way these various Central American countries reacted to the civil war. 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 (145). But their literary traditions, in particular, are similar enough – with many writers, such as the Nicaraguan poet and *testimonio* writer Claribel Alegría and the Salvadoran novelist Horacio Castellanos Moya taking up residence in neighboring countries – that this article stresses continuities rather than differences.
- 5 Arturo Arias mentions that in his professional life he was once asked informally by a professor “Is there really a Central American literature?” (186).

- 6 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” (212).
- 7 The classic *testimonio* *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* witnessed 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 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 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’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). 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 shifted and got restricted to the dichotomy between truth and falsity. The importance of hearing subaltern stories, their struggle and injustices that were the basis of *testimonio* (which was what Menchú was narrating in her account), were lost in the midst of the controversy.

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