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"Bearing Witness, Baring Souls"

"All of us were born half-dead in 1932."--Roque Dalton

Abstract:

Testimonios tell the true stories of common people confronting superior, intransigent forces. This paper explores the tradition of Meso-American testimonial literature whose roots lie in the accounts by Sahagun and de Las Casas, and focussing on twentieth-century Salvadoran testimonies and the films that have evolved with them.

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By 1987, the civil war in El Salvador had intensified: Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero was long dead and Roberto D'Aubuisson, the leader of the Death Squads who were responsible for his assassination, was in his prime. At that time, I was involved in community organizing in Los Angeles. Fellow organizers enthusiastically told me about a book of photographs of El Salvador compiled by Harry Mattison and Susan Meiselas. Even though I'd seen this book now and then in bookstores or at various Latin American festivals and peace fairs, I could never bring myself to look at it: a small voice deep in my psyche warned me off. I knew that there was *something* there that I could not bear to see. At long last, when I had been asked about it so often that I could no longer put off the inevitable, I opened the book, not to the first page, but to the middle. There I saw a photograph of a row of mostly male, naked, mutilated corpses, their genitals cut off. I nearly fainted from the impact. Until this day, I have never seen the rest of the book. I am grateful that I did not look long enough to see their faces: I did not want to have the familiar recognition I have felt walking the streets of Santa Ana or San Salvador, where every man and woman looks like they could be a cousin of mine.

I doubt that the photographer intended the book for me, the Estadosunidense daughter of a Salvadoran immigrant, or for my mother, or, for that matter, for the many Salvadoreños who have taken refuge in the U.S. For me, as a historian, there are several questions: for whom is such a book intended? Whose bias does it reflect? Whose purpose does it serve? Furthermore, who is the intended audience of the small but growing number of testimonios, photography books, and films that deal with the violence in Latin America?

I acknowledge the work on the testimonio has been done by a number of scholars, particularly John Beverley¹ whose groundbreaking essays set the earliest parameters of the genre, but I believe that the testimonio is an evolving form that is inherently political and which adapts to the medium capable of the widest distribution, and is therefore, employed by storytellers from different class backgrounds who may use different media but who hold a common purpose.

The benchmark of Latin American testimonios is Miguel Marmol, Marmol's surreal account of his life as a shoemaker, labor organizer and Communist in El Salvador as well as his arrest and shooting by a firing squad during La Matanza, the central crisis of modern Salvadoran history. His story is gripping, horrifying, yet picaresque: Captured and led before a firing squad whose hapless soldiers couldn't hit their targets, he and his comrades taunted them:

¹John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: Testimonio," and "Second Thoughts on Testimonio" in *Against Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993)

Ni ha tirar bien han aprendido, cabrones. . .Mátennos de una vez,
hijos de puta, con un chorro de tiros. . .Viva la Internacional
Comunista, Viva el Partido Comunista Salvadoreño. . .Viva el
camarada Stalin, Muera el General Martinez!

["You haven't even learned to shoot straight, f-----s! . . . Long live International Communism! Long
live the Salvadoran Communist Party! Long live comrade Stalin! Death to General Martinez!"]

When the bullets find their mark, and one penetrates his nipple at an angle and passes through his left arm, he is declares that he is relieved ("Para mí la herida fue sabrosa...") claiming that it releases the pressure from the ropes that were binding his arms. When they wound but do not kill his companion; Marmol is on his feet, "Putá--les dije--asi no vamos a terminar nunca!" ("Damn! At this rate we'll never be finished!") The next fusillade kills the last of his companions and seriously injures Marmol. Miraculously, he is left for dead: The force of the shot's impact had thrown him back; he collapsed and played possum. They check him to make sure he is dead, preparing to shoot him again from close-range to finish the job, when one of the soldiers says "Eso es gastar pólvora en zopes. ¿No vez qu tiene los cesos de fuera? " ["That would be feeding gunpowder to the vultures. Don't you see his brains all over the place?"] Apparently, his comrade's brains had splattered onto Marmol so that it appeared that he also had been killed. ²

Marmol feels that he is born again. Crawling home through the darkness, he is aided by other peasants. In the wake of the executions of all his comrades, he still manages to bask in the tributes of those who love him as he takes shelter under the altar set up by his wife and sister as a tribute to him. It would, after all, be too dangerous to make the smallest acknowledgement that he has survived. The funerary tributes continue as Marmol relates, "I got a kick out of the praying, since the neighbors, friends and acquaintances had many memories of me, of both sad and happy times." ³

True to the paradigm of the testimonio, Marmol's account was recorded not by Marmol himself, although his stories themselves could be regarded as oral history, but rather by poet and fellow Salvadoran militant⁴, Roque Dalton who had heard fragments of Marmol's stories from others. His collaboration with Marmol did not commence, however, until after a chance meeting with "Miguelito" in Prague in 1966, thirty-four years after La Matanza. The thought began to percolate in his mind that making a record of the Communist uprising, not from the distorted perspective of mainstream, U.S./Cold War-influenced history, but from that of *the* survivor of the

²Roque Dalton, Miguel Marmol (Willimantic, CT.: Curbstone Press, 1987) p. 259
[Spanish edition: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1982]

³ Ibid., 267

⁴"Salvadoran militant" and "militant revolutionary" are Dalton's own descriptions of himself.
(Miguel Marmol, p. 19)

Central event of modern Salvadoran history, would be a valuable chronicle for a people whose history has been obliterated by the scoundrels who wish to conceal their ignominious actions from the judgment of history. The indictment of the ruling oligarchy of El Salvador would be irrefutable. In both Marmol's telling and Dalton's compilation and recording of the stories, there is the added element of myth-making. In this classic work, Dalton and Marmol not only established the salient characteristics of the testimonio but rerouted the course of Salvadoran identity after the devastation of La Matanza. Like Marmol, Roque Dalton consistently demonstrated his deep commitment to the principles of Marxism, of self-determination, and of his dedication to win back El Salvador for the people. It was a devotion that, in 1975, cost him his life at the hands of someone from his own party for whom his politics were not pure enough.⁵

The identity of a people is created by a mix of myth and history: Fidel Castro writing his history of Cuba with lemon juice in jail after the attack on the Moncada garrison⁶; Miguel Hidalgo appropriating La Virgen de Guadalupe as a symbol of Mexican independence; George Washington admitting that he cut down his cherry tree; Abraham Lincoln learning to read by the light of the hearth in his log cabin. Just as Fidel Castro's famous defense, *History Will Absolve Me*, was intended to commandeer the conservative ship of state, inspire a class consciousness, and shape a new Cuban identity based on a recognition of the subordination of Cuba to the Spanish empire and American hegemony, Miguel Marmol and Roque Dalton attempted to wrest control of Salvadoran identity away from the Ladino elites and create an identity of a Salvadoran proletariat. New myths had to supplant the old ones: The tale of the little shoemaker who survived the firing squads of La Matanza, recovered to live a long life and tell his tales, certainly qualifies.

Testimonials have always been among the many arrows in the historian's quiver: The eyewitness account of a tragedy is one of the valuable tools used to arrive at an accurate depiction of an incident or an era, but it is *only* one of the many sources on which we rely, and we are, of course, well aware of the biases of the genre. Nowadays, however, the term **testimonio** has come to have its own unique category which I define thus:

Testimonio is an extended, narrative, eyewitness account of apolitically-motivated violent incident or chain of events, created by a victim who is a member of the targeted community, in collaboration with a translator or interviewer, for a definite political purpose.

⁵Roque Dalton Poemas Clandestinos/Clandestine Poems (A translation Project of the Roque Dalton Solidarity Brigade) (Solidarity Publications: Solidarity Publications, 1986)

⁶Fidel Castro "History Will Absolve Me," in Fidel Castro's Political Strategy: From Moncada to Victory by Marta Harnacker (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1987).

By this, I mean:

- "an eyewitness account" : limits the teller of the tale to one who was him/herself present at the event
- "of a violent incident or chain of events": the reported violent incident or chain of events occurs over a finite period of time.
- "victim": for want of a better word, indicates a member of the community which is being attacked.
- "who is a member of a targeted community": the incident in question cannot be simply an isolated urban criminal act but rather part of an organized pattern of systematic repression in which the victims are members of a particular community. I would add, however, that this need not be a subaltern community: political repression in Latin America is not limited to indigenous, non-literate populations;
- "in collaboration with a translator or interviewer": the testimony is created in close cooperation with an interlocutor whose interest in the account is vital to its creation
- "for a definite political purpose": the eyewitness and the mediator agree upon the audience they wish to reach and the purpose they wish to achieve.

Readers of John Beverley's⁷ work will recognize the similarities between our definitions, but I stand apart from him in that I regard the collaboration between the eyewitness and his translator, or what the postmodernists call an interlocutor, and their joint political agenda as being *essential* for the testimonio. For example, even though Miguel Marmol was quite literate, he told his stories for thirty-four years without making a written record of them. Everyone in El Salvador knew of the survivor of 1932; the tale of the survivor of La Matanza created a mythology of a common man's resistance to authority, but it was not until Dalton met him that his stories were recorded. In all but rare instances, the testimonio of a nonliterate narrator would not have been recorded but for the persistence and determination of the interlocutor. Can testimonio really imply "a challenge to the loss of authority of orality in the context of processes of cultural modernization that privilege literacy, writing and literature as norms of expression," since it is a medium for those from a *dominant culture*⁸ such as Europe or the United States to draw attention to the struggles of non-literate people with whom they sympathize or for a literate victim from a persecuted class to draw attention to his/her own plight.

⁷John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990)

⁸I prefer to use "dominant culture" rather than "colonizer" because even though there is a gross imbalance of geopolitical power between the Europe or the U.S. and the Central American nations, the fact of the Conquest by the Spanish makes the use of the latter term confusing in a Latin American context.

There are two different parties in this matter: the victims⁹ for whom orality has authority; and those who privilege literacy, writing and literature, who judge that individual stories of oppression can be used to draw global attention to the sufferings of the victims. It is obvious that the former would have little interest in the affairs of the latter if they were not directly affected by them. In whose culture, then, is the challenge to orality really taking place? If the genocide or other trauma ceases, will the non-literate people take up writing as their dominant mode of expression?

We can agree that the ephemeral nature of oral history is not valued in literate societies. Thus, in societies that privilege literacy, writing and literature, it is only through the creation of a permanent record that reality enters their realm of perception. Only through the production of the written word, photograph or cinematic film is the ephemeral transformed into the concrete. The issue is not the artistic value or originality of the record that is created but the mere fact that it *is* created since it is unlikely to be created spontaneously in the absence of an outside interlocutor whose intervention is essential to its creation.

As with any definition, no sooner has one specified the perimeters of the beast than all sorts of questions arise: What about long-term repression, such as the Guatemalan people suffered during the regime of Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1922) that Miguel Angel Asturias described so eloquently in his novels?¹⁰ Or the time of the generals in modern Argentina? If those fit the criteria, what about slavery in Latin America in Haiti and Brazil? Are slave narratives testimonio, or are they a separate category, and why? Is the painstakingly-constructed account of daily misery in the favelas of Sao Paulo that Carolina María de Jesus recounted in a diary made of scraps of recycled paper which was published as *Child of the Dark*¹¹ a testimonio, or is poverty and urban violence a completely different category? And finally, what about the authors who turn the horrors that they have seen into works of the imagination, as, for instance, *Cenizas de Izalco*, Salvadoran poet Claribel Alegria's novel about La Matanza, which she witnessed as an eight year-old daughter of a physician from her living room window; or Manlio Argueta's *One*

⁹I use "victim" rather than "subaltern" because I am not convinced that the latter term is entirely appropriate in Latin America since victims of political persecution who write testimonios may not be from an oppressed class, for example, Jacobo Timerman, an Argentine newspaper publisher and a Jew, wrote Prisoner without a Name, Cell Without a Number (New York: Vintage Books, 1988) [Preso Sin Nombre, Celda sin numero] about his arrest in Argentina in 1977. The Argentine authorities detained him for 34 months, during which they tortured him in rooms decorated with photographs of Adolf Hitler.

¹⁰Miguel Angel Asturias, El Señor Presidente (1946) (San Jose, Costa Rica: Editorial Universitaria Centroamericana, 1973)(in English: New York: Atheneum, 1963); Viernes de Dolores (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1972)

¹¹Carolina Maria de Jesus, Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1963) [published in the Portuguese language as Quarto de Despejo (Livreria Francisco Alves, 1960)]

Day of Life about the experiences of a Salvadoran peasant during the civil war; or Arturo Arias *After the Bombs*¹² which is based on the horrors of his childhood in Guatemala? Moreover, for the purposes of this paper, what are the cultural predecessors of the testimonio?

"Latin American literature," said Miguel Angel Asturias, "has always been a literature of protest." From the earliest colonial writers such as Bernál Diaz del Castillo who wrote *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico*¹³ to show how he had been overlooked by the king despite his many years of service to the crown, and Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas who mounted an almost single-handed campaign against the treatment of the Indians by the conquistadors and colonists, the great writers of Latin America have had a political agenda: They have employed their art to draw attention to injustices in their societies. The ground-breaking work with indigenous sources of Miguel Leon-Portilla, James Lockhart and others, has led to the recovery of works of protest against the Spanish such as those compiled in the popular collection entitled *The Broken Spears*. The political agenda of the testimonio has been identified as being one of its major distinguishing characteristics as a late twentieth century form, but I would argue that it is one of the oldest forms of polemic in Latin America; one that found its first expression in Las Casas' vigorous defense of the Nahuas in Mexico.

Las Casas was not, himself, a victim of the Conquest. The son and brother of men who sailed with Columbus, he came to the new World first as a doctrinero, a religious teacher, to participate in the conquest of Cuba. What he saw sickened him to the depths of his soul. The rivers of human blood that he saw, flowing, he wrote, "as if a multitude of cows had been slaughtered," sparked the commitment he made to spend his life campaigning against the treatment of the Indians. He was the first priest ordained in the New World and he retired to the cloister to write his *Brevisima Relación de la Destrucción de Las Indias*. (*A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*)¹⁴. In real terms, his proposed reforms did little to change the conditions of life for the Nahuas: He was unable to stop the encomienda, that is, the labor-tribute system that gave the early colonists control of the lives of the Indians who had survived the conquest. He proposed separate protective reservation-like missions for the Indians but they did not prove viable. His attempts to encourage the colonists to do their own manual labor met with derision

¹²Arturo Arias, *After the Bombs* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone, 1990)
[published in Spanish as *Despues de las bombas*, by Editorial Joaquin Mortiz, 1979]

¹³Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The True History of the Conquest of New Mexico*, 2 volumes
(Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1967) [*Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España escrita por el Capitan Bernal Diaz del Castillo, uno de sus conquistadores* (Madrid: Emprenta del Reyno, 1632)]

¹⁴Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Historia de Las Indias*, edición de Agustín Millares Carlo y estudio preliminar de Lewis Hanke (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1951)

and outright hostility. When, at last, as Bishop of Chiapas, he tried to use his ecclesiastical powers to curb their maltreatment of the Indians, denying the sacraments to the encomenderos, his efforts sparked a counter-move of denying food to the monastics. Nevertheless, he spent most of his ninety-three years writing the earliest versions of what I would call testimonio: In heavy tomes, he described what he saw, he argued for change, he advocated for the Indians, he bent the king's ear in every way possible, all to little avail. Even the laws that he succeeded in getting passed against the encomienda were ignored because it was not in the interest of the king's treasury to enforce them. While some credit him with having brought an end to the encomienda, others hold that it was already in collapse, a victim of the demographic collapse that resulted from the armed conquest and the death from the diseases the Spanish inadvertently spread among the Indians.

In Spain and among the Ladino elites of Latin America, Las Casas is blamed for having originated "the Black Legend" which forms the basis for anti-Hispanism. Las Casas' tracts were published for a non-Spanish audience by the Dutch, and quickly translated for the French and the English who, in the century following Las Casas' death, were vying with Spain for control of Europe. Las Casas' writing provided the perfect propaganda against the Spanish. The apologists for the Spanish argue that Las Casas' data, collected for the purpose of making the case of the Indians to the king, "blackens" the reputation of the Spaniards unfairly, and deliberately overlooks the intermarriage and other "positive" interactions between them and the indigenous peoples. Furthermore, clashes between Spain and other countries, such as the Texas Revolt (1836), the Mexican War (1846-1848) and the California Gold Rush (1848) became perfect occasions for reviving The Black Legend for propaganda purposes.

What was said of Las Casas in that era could be asserted with equal vigor about some late twentieth-century journalists--Margaret Randall comes to mind--as well as of other mediators. In status and in purpose, their aims are similar: To help to publicize the struggles of an illiterate or pre-literate society against an immovable force. There is unique power in a victim's own account of prevailing against injustice or evil. How does the witness overcome the traditional modes of deference--respect for authority, deference to elders, modesty--in a non-literate culture like that of many of the indigenous peoples of Central America, particularly if the written word is not a medium that would spring to his/her mind? But, for the purposes of the publishers of these stories, weakness and victimization are essential to the narratives. If El Pulgarcito, "the little flea" as Dalton called El Salvador¹⁵ was a great nation like China, the approach of the United States and Europe to it would be different.

Photographs and cinematic films capture the stories of these indigenous activists and give the impression that they are speaking for themselves. Are they really the initiators of the narrative, or are they manipulated and defined by the masters of the technology who are recording their stories? While the most successful indigenous activists are, what Dalton calls,

¹⁵Roque Dalton, Las Historias Prohibidas del Pulgarcito (Mexico: Siglo Vientiuno Editores, 1988)

"organic intellectuals," this is not necessarily true of the witnesses who come to consciousness and whose stories are immortalized in print or film.

Cinema is, by its very nature, a collaborative effort. Even a half-hour short subject seems to have a endless list specialists who have worked on it, from the producers and directors to the caterers and "best boys."¹⁶ One example of a Hollywood production that exalts the virtues of a hero of the poor is "Romero"(1989). The film, financed by the Paulist Fathers, depicts the coming to consciousness of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero of El Salvador who was assassinated by the Death squads, led by the butcher of ARENA¹⁷, Roberto D'Aubuisson . Who was the audience for this epic? It could be argued that it was meant for the Salvadoran people, to give them voice and identity at a time when they were still mired in Civil War but what is the likelihood, given the poverty of the country and the attendant lack of videorecorders and videocassettes, that they would actually get the opportunity to see it? A recent in the New York Times about a newly-discovered archeological dig in El Salvador states that "It's surprising but also sad [that]. . .The standard of living 1,400 years ago was higher than it is now among the peasants of El Salvador ."¹⁸

For the Paulists, and by extension, for the Roman Catholic Church, Romero portrays the best the Church has to offer: A bishop who stands up for the poor and the victims of the death squads. By dying for his beliefs, he exemplifies the Catholic ideal: the martyr who has overcome his weaknesses to face the ultimate sacrifice. Another American-made film, "Choices of the Heart" (1987) tells the story of the rapes and murders of American lay missionary Jean Donovan and the three nuns who were her companions. Their blemishes, if they can be characterized that way, are limited to very minor ones: Romero's scholarly temperament and traditional priestly preparation make him a reluctant activist; Jean Donovan, a child of wealth and privilege, leaves an unresolved relationship with a boyfriend in the United States. In both cases, the films fictionalize true stories, highlighting the good deeds and eventual martyrdom of the protagonists. Another film of this type, cited here for the sake of comparison, is from Brazil: "The Burning Season: The Chico Mendes Story" which chronicles the life of a Brazilian activist, Chico Mendes, his fight to preserve the rainforest, and the actions that led to his political assassination. Curiously enough, the late Raul Julia played the main characters in both "Romero" and "The Burning Season." Chico Mendes provides our segue from docudramas to documentaries: During

¹⁶A "best boy" is movie industry slang for the first assistant to the head electrician (Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 2nd Edition, Unabridged. New York: Random House, 1987. p.199)

¹⁷ARENA, the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, is the most right-wing of the Salvadoran political parties. Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley Guerrillas & Revolution in Latin America (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton, 1992) p. 211-212.

¹⁸"Volcano Captured Corn, Chilies and House Mice: Sixth Century village is so well-preserved archaeologists call it a Central American Pompeii." (New York Times, Science News: April 8, 1997) pgs. C1, C5.

his life time, another film entitled "Voice of the Amazon," produced by the Better World Society chronicled his life and struggles. Released in the year following Mendes' assassination, it gives a moving testimony of the bitter wars between the residents of the rain forests and those who want to extract the forests' riches without regard for the consequences to the environment.

Another class of film is a direct corollary to the testimonio. Films like "When the Mountains Trembled," "Maria's Story," and "A Salvadoran Woman Speaks," which are made by independent filmmakers, are the chilling stories of individuals who were not well-known, whose witnessing of a violent event in El Salvador is portrayed.

There is an apolitical quality to these films, as if the filmmakers, in appealing to a mainstream American and European audience, are not taking a political stand, but rather are calling attention to situations which should outrage every reasonable person, as well they should. In Latin America, however, these films get very little support. The photographs which show the atrocities of government troops; the widely-publicized excavations of hidden mass-burial sites which, through forensic evidence, prove the validity of the claims of the filmmakers--that the government troops are responsible for the massacres, that the weapons used for the horrors are provided by the U.S.; and finally the witness accounts which corroborate the forensic evidence, all are dismissed by their government officials, viewed with suspicion by the middle- and upper-classes and are generally seen as propaganda for the Left. Even Amnesty International, Americas Watch and other human rights organizations are regarded with distrust and hostility by the middle- and upper-classes in El Salvador. I can only surmise that the level of denial, social repression and the censorship of the press are so profound, that the truth cannot pass through those filters.

The Left in Latin America and in the U.S., both "organic" and trained intellectuals, are attempting to reclaim what the elites have appropriated for themselves: the ostensible middle-ground in the information wars. By gathering and publishing the testimonios, by making films that turn the spotlight on the victims and heroes of the unrepresented, they are following in Las Casas' footsteps, trying to influence the omnipotent United States to use its resources to help the powerless.

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