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Documents in Crisis: Literatures of Fact in Mexico

A number of the papers included in the panel on “Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Mexico” treat texts that play interesting games across the borders of what we have traditionally called, and persist in calling, fiction and nonfiction. Chronicle, testimonial literature and historical novel bridge the fiction-nonfiction divide in ways that call attention to the constructed, conventional nature of that very distinction.

The paper that I am going to present is part of a much larger, still new project on nonfiction literary writing in twentieth-century Mexico. Under the working title of “Documents in Crisis: Literatures of Fact in Mexico” I am beginning to examine some fundamental problems of nonfiction writing by looking at texts published across the century that have been produced and/or read as nonfiction. I start from the premise that facts, like fictions, are inventions, constructions of our human capacity to remember, to forget and to narrate through--and only through--language. That is human subjectivity and therefore human knowledge and human truth are not “given” prior to or outside of language and narrative, but rather are constituted by them under always changing historical and cultural conditions. In my study I will analyze examples of nonfiction narrative such as autobiography, memoir and chronicle, and also documentary theater in order to address at least three key issues: first, the constitution of subjectivity in nonfiction or the question of “who speaks?” in these texts; second, the changing nature of facts and evidence across time and between genres; and third, the gendered construction of the authority to speak and to be heard through the conventions of factual discourse.

“Speaking from the Soapbox: Benita Galeana’s Benita”

Elena Poniatowska once posed a rhetorical question when speaking of her celebrated “novela-testimonio” Hasta no verte Jesús mío. The writer asked, “¿Qué hubiera sucedido si Jesusa Palancares [Josefina Bórquez] escribe ella su propia historia y no soy yo la autora de Hasta no verte Jesús mío?” This question, which implies the extreme unlikelihood of a life story being written by an illiterate, poor woman, resonates throughout much of the theory and criticism of Latin American testimonial literature of the past twenty years. Producers of testimonio and scholarly readers alike grapple with the problem of the relationship between elite writers and subaltern subjects and with the question of who speaks in mediated testimonies.<sup>1</sup> Because testimonial literature has seemed to provide a new and radical alternative to five centuries of hegemonic writing about Latin America, the matter of the authenticity of the transcribed “voices of the voiceless” has been studied with some urgency.

Miguel Barnet was the first writer to theorize the relationship between himself and his illiterate subjects, and his 1969 essay “La novela testimonio. Socio-Literatura” has had a lasting impact on the inquiry into how testimonio is produced and how it should be read. Barnet used the term gestor for his ideal of a self-effacing, discrete intellectual who identifies completely with his subject and respects the subject’s character and language, while investing his own

considerable research skills, imagination and aesthetic sensibilities into the final written product. It is not difficult to detect many contradictions in Barnet's description of himself as gestor of, for example, Biografía de un cimarrón, and his own statements in the 1969 essay already raise doubts about the status of testimonial voices and the alternative representations of "la otra cara de la medalla-historia" that they construct (Barnet 291). For example, he refers to his writing as documents of critical social events based on the testimonies of real witnesses and participants, but he undermines the documentary and factual claim by highlighting the role of the writer in "decanting" his subject's language to reproduce the "tone" while providing a "style", and even in inventing material "sobre la plataforma de realidad inalterable" (297). Barnet's fluid switching among the codes for fictional and documentary, literary and ethnographic discourses conveys a contradictory image of testimonio without sufficient reflection on unresolved issues. However, as one of the first essays to describe testimonial literature in Latin America and the role of the intellectual in its production, "La novela testimonio" accurately prefigures many aspects of the ongoing debate over this "different kind of writing" (Gugelberger 4).<sup>2</sup>

Returning to Elena Poniatowska's hypothetical situation of an illiterate, subaltern member of society directly authoring his or her autobiography, we can find a text that seems to fit that unlikely scenario as early as 1940 in Mexico. Benita by Benita Galeana, a long-time Mexican Communist Party militant, recounts her life story from the age of about two to about thirty-six years old. Galeana was born in rural Guerrero in 1904,<sup>3</sup> and raised in poverty by her older sister after the death of their mother and their father before Benita was six years old.<sup>4</sup> Early in adolescence she moved to Acapulco with another sister, and she eventually made her way to Mexico City by the early 1920s, where she spent most of the rest of her long life. Benita Galeana died in the spring of 1995. Benita is still relatively little known and little studied in spite of new editions in Mexico in 1974, 1979 and 1990, and an English translation which appeared in the U.S. in 1994. The interest in Latin American testimonio and autobiography, in particular their appeal as vehicles for the expression of women's lives, has thus far largely overlooked this life story of a peasant, then working-class Mexican woman.

In Mexico, Carlos Monsiváis paid tribute to the historical Galeana and to her autobiography in a newspaper article from 1975. He later included the article in his book Amor perdido (1977) in the section of character sketches entitled "Mártires, militantes, memoriosos." Calling Benita a "testimonio excepcional" Monsiváis emphasizes Galeana's political militancy, which he interprets as a continuation of the energy of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and its promise of social transformation. He also acknowledges the critical perspective that Galeana brings to her generally celebratory representation of the inner workings of the Mexican Communist Party (Partido Comunista de México, PCM).<sup>5</sup> In addition to Monsiváis's article, there are two published essays that analyze Benita within the context of writing by Mexican women. Marta Robles includes a section on Benita Galeana in her book La sombra fugitiva, which is the only general work on Mexican literature that identifies this text. Robles offers Benita as an alternative to writing by middle-class women, seeing Galeana as both an exceptional individual and a representative of the masses of poor Mexican women. Edith Negrín's 1990 article "Benita Galeana o la escritura como liberación" takes a thematic approach to the text, summarizing the many obstacles that poverty and patriarchy impose on the social destiny of a peasant girl in Mexico. All three critics refer to Benita rather loosely as testimonio and autobiography, but they do not situate the terms in the current critical debate. Completing the scant bibliography is my 1997 biographical essay "Benita Galeana; en la lucha," published in

Las desobedientes: Mujeres de nuestra América. This piece focuses on documenting the life of the historical Benita Galeana and does not undertake an analysis of her writing.

Benita is a unique early example of women's life-writing in Mexico which participates in the conventions of traditional autobiography and contemporary testimony while simultaneously challenging generic expectations in both directions. It stands out as a hybrid among hybrids, a largely unmediated "autobiography of those who do not write," to use Philippe Lejeune's well-known phrase. This study of Benita as a testimonial autobiography addresses the question "who speaks?" by examining the conventions and the discourses that inform both the structure of the story and the narrator-protagonist's language, and by focusing on its portrayal of the Mexican Communist Party and popular struggle. Mixed messages are the hallmark of Benita Galeana's narrative inscription of her contradictory and problematical relationship with patriarchal society and with the Communist Party's Stalinist ideology and hierarchical organization. At every textual level the autobiographical I signals her rebellion and her obedience, revealing through words and silences the many tensions inherent in her struggle first for survival and later for transcendence.

"De ella se podría decir que sabe escribir, pero no sabe leer." This extraordinary statement appears in the prologue to the first edition of Benita, written by Galeana's husband and fellow Communist Party activist Mario Gill. If functional illiteracy is an obstacle to sustained writing and therefore an obstacle to self-expression by vast numbers of society's poorest and most marginalized members, the surprising history of the composition of Benita merits consideration. We have three sources for understanding how Benita Galeana knew how to write without knowing how to read: references in the autobiography to her struggle for literacy, Mario Gill's "Palabras preliminares" for the 1940 edition, and Galeana's words as recorded in an interview (unpublished) that I conducted with her in Mexico City in June 1994. All three tell essentially the same story, and there is nothing to dispute that Galeana, unaided, wrote the first version of her autobiography.

According to the autobiographical narrative, Benita's older sister Camila refused to let her go to school because she depended on Benita's help with the cooking and selling of food and with the care of Camila's children. Anxious to learn, she describes studying the alphabet by herself from a primer and memorizing the basic phonetic equivalents for each letter. However, this rudimentary knowledge did not enable Galeana to read or write. Throughout her life she continued to try to improve her literacy skills, but as an adult she still could not read a newspaper with any degree of fluency. Nevertheless, toward the end of Benita, the protagonist mentions that she has a typewriter in her possession, and she tells an old friend that she is writing her life story. Mario Gill, in our second source, explains how: "Benita nunca ha estado en la escuela. Por su propio esfuerzo, de chica, logró aprender el abecedario y conocer las vocales. . . . Después Benita aprendió a escribir en máquina. Y escribe al tacto. Por medio de la fonética, sabe que determinados sonidos se imprimen en la máquina con este a aquel dedo de la mano. Así va escribiendo lo que piensa" (1940, 7).<sup>6</sup> In our interview Galeana confirmed that this is exactly how she wrote the book, and she added some detail about what motivated her. Referring to her break-up with Humberto Padilla, an engineer with whom she had lived from about 1935- 39, Galeana said: "Humberto se va y no sé qué expresión hice, que él regresa con la máquina y me dice, 'Te traje la máquina porque la quieres más a ella que a mí.'<sup>7</sup> Cuando él me deja la máquina, la máquina habla conmigo, seguro, porque me dice 'síéntate y yo te ayudaré.' Me senté en la máquina a distraerme de que adoraba a mi marido que se iba y a confesarme [con ella] en vez del

cura. Entonces las letras me sirvieron de desahogo y fueron tanto que iba recordando cosas e iba escribiendo.”

A facsimile of one page of the resulting manuscript, reprinted in the 1940 edition, can be deciphered with some difficulty, but it bears little resemblance to standard Spanish prose. Galeana’s attempt to transcribe her own speech phonetically is best read aloud. In this way the reader can “hear” the story through the visual interference of massive misspellings, irregular word boundaries and an almost complete lack of punctuation. Mario Gill took the manuscript at her request and edited it to the extent of standardizing the spelling and providing consistent punctuation and chapter breaks. Galeana is insistent on the point that Gill did not alter the language or the structure of the story beyond these necessary corrections. He consulted with her throughout the process whenever a word or phrase was unclear, and when she heard the book read back to her she recognized the language as her own.

Benita Galeana published her book in 1940 with a Communist Party print shop, Imprenta Mels. The first edition numbered one thousand copies, which she reports were quickly sold out. The front cover and the title page identify the book as Benita (Autobiografía) by Benita Galeana. The volume includes the aforementioned “Palabras preliminares” and a series of engraved illustrations created by members of the Taller de Gráfica Popular. The Taller, begun in 1937, was a break away group from the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios, which was closely associated with the PCM and produced illustrations for the Party newspaper, El Machete. The Taller artists formed a collective to create realist art in the service of the people. The engravings done for Benita are an example of this solidarity across class lines. Pablo O’Higgins is perhaps the best known of those who contributed to Galeana’s book. In addition to explaining the writing process, Mario Gill’s prologue introduces the historical Benita Galeana to the reader, verifies the factual nature of the story to be told, and gives some background on the Party’s struggle during the late 1920s and the 1930s. Benita was out of print until 1974 when Editorial Extemporáneos, a socialist publishing house in Mexico City, reissued it. The 1974 edition made three critical and unfortunate cuts to the manuscript. Gill’s “Preliminares,” the engravings, and the final chapter of the autobiography entitled “Bajo la Bandera de la Internacional” were deleted, and no subsequent edition has restored them. Therefore they are effectively lost to today’s reader.<sup>8</sup> Editores Lince republished the Extemporáneos text in 1990, adding an introduction by Elena Poniatowska and a series of sepia-tint watercolor illustrations by Gabriela de la Vega. In 1994 the Latin American Literary Review Press published an English translation by Amy Diane Prince that follows the Lince edition without the illustrations, and adds a foreword by the literary scholar Ilan Stavans.

The history of the writing and publishing process begins to make the case for reading Benita as a testimonial autobiography and a virtually unique creation in Latin American letters. First, Galeana’s life story, announced as autobiography in 1940, fulfills the necessary condition for the autobiographical pact given by Philippe Lejeune: the identity of author (“I, the undersigned”), narrator and protagonist which must be visibly established by the shared proper name. Lejeune further describes autobiography in the following much quoted sentence from On Autobiography: “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). His privileging of the individual life and personality and the insistence on the referential quality of autobiography fits Lejeune’s reading of the Western canon of texts written primarily by elite white males. Superficially, Benita can be said to fit a similar mold, although Galeana is a radically untypical and unlikely autobiographer. As a functionally illiterate, politically marginalized working-class woman her writing lies far outside the tradition of Augustine,

Montaigne and Rousseau, and it also differs from the precedents set more recently by elite women writing in the West. Feminist theories of autobiography and theories of testimonio will help elucidate the marks of gender and class in the structure and the language of Galeana's life-writing.

Lejeune himself problematizes his core definition of autobiography when he opens his inquiry to include "the autobiography of those who do not write" in chapter nine of On Autobiography. His consideration of collaborative autobiographies or testimonies produced in France raises questions similar to those confronted by critics of Latin American testimonial literature. Lejeune calls testimony a new genre, an intermediate form between autobiography and biography, which can express multiple points of view. He notes that the collaborative writing process "damages" the notion of identity and forces us to ask to whom does the life in question belong, to the model or to the writer? (192) Of particular interest for us, in this chapter Lejeune seems to approach a concept of multiple subject positions constituting the "individual personality" when he acknowledges that collaborative autobiography has no one grounding subject and that any single person is already several people when engaged in writing (188). He gives the impression that these traits are defects or problems of testimony in a negative sense, while readers of testimonio explore similar features as sources of positive semantic complexity and originality and a welcome alternative to canonical representations of Latin America. Finally, Lejeune explores a crucial topic when he exposes the unequal power relations between model and writer, which he describes as a one-way exchange that robs the model of his speech and memory. Lejeune's cautious view of collaborative autobiography contrasts with the celebration of "giving voice to the voiceless" which was a prominent mode of early analyses of testimonio.

Just as Benita can be "easily" identified as an autobiography within established conventions of reading, readers of testimonio will quickly find themselves on familiar ground due to structural, linguistic and thematic aspects of this unusual book. Most testimonies include a prologue or introduction, usually written by the author of the text in the case of mediated testimonies. This piece attests to the documentary or nonfictional nature of the life story to follow, and it often describes the writing or editing process. The importance of prologues in shaping our reading is convincingly argued by Elzbieta Sklodowska in her ambitious 1994 study of testimony and its poetics. In the case of Benita, Galeana's dependence on better-educated male associates to produce the original edition and the numerous editorial interventions of 1974, 1990 and 1994 signify a progressive loss of authorial control over the book, which is a concern for testimonio. While Galeana strongly endorsed Gill's prologue and defended that he did not alter the life story that she herself composed at the typewriter, it seems that she had little input into the subsequent ways in which Benita has been framed and, more seriously, cut. This is a pertinent concern when treating a text that represents a struggle for political legitimacy and narrative authority by a subaltern subject. In both the text of Benita and in our interview Galeana complains of not being heard or heeded by Mexican intellectuals with whom she had contact. With regard to her practical need for literacy and increased knowledge of Communist Party history and ideology, Galeana laments that the Party did not provide opportunities for her education throughout her many years of active membership. In spite of the obstacles, Galeana had a real vocation for writing and Benita is not her only published work. Her experience in trying to compose and publish other writings later in her life exemplifies the difficulties inherent in collaborative writing projects, which may entail both acts of solidarity and of betrayal. After the death of her husband in 1973, Galeana wrote a series of short stories based on the oral traditions of her home town and on her own girlhood memories. She had a positive experience

with the editor at Extemporáneos who corrected the prose and published El peso mocho in 1979. In contrast, Galeana was disillusioned by the treatment of a group of essays on contemporary politics that she entrusted to another person who, in her mind, destroyed the manuscript by making extensive revisions and distorting her thought. Her extremely slow and laborious writing process and her inability to read her writing with any real facility meant that she remained dependent on the intervention of others, with mixed results.

In the case of Benita, the introductions by Elena Poniatowska (1990) and Ilan Stavans (1994) are framing devices that change the text in ways that may or may not be harmonious with the author's interests. Both pieces confirm that Benita Galeana is a real person and a public figure of some note in leftist circles. They prepare us to accept the autobiographical pact already established on the title page, simultaneously affirming and undermining Galeana's own agency as a narrator. The inclusion of a piece by Poniatowska might also be viewed as a simple ploy to sell more books in Mexico, although the nature of the writer's long career justifies the publisher's choice on intellectual and artistic grounds as well. As expected, she incorporates extensive interview material into her introduction, giving the impression of preserving a direct record of Galeana's voice. The piece is clearly structured to portray her interlocutor as a profeminist and a figure of solidarity with working-class movements in Mexico. It also extends Galeana's life story well beyond 1940 by offering anecdotes about her activities in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Galeana's involvement in the 1958 railroad strike and the 1968 student movement, and her generosity to others after the 1985 earthquake consolidate the image of a woman who was dedicated to social change and justice. When Poniatowska challenges Galeana's allegiance to the Communist Party in the opening passage of the introduction, the reader may suspect the interviewer of trying to impose her own views on her interviewee rather than listening to her. In fact it can be argued that Poniatowska takes her cue from Benita, picking up on tensions inscribed in the text and pursuing them in her conversation with its author. Galeana was familiar with the finished introduction by Poniatowska, and although she said that she found it too complimentary, she didn't mention any real objection to its content. Overall Poniatowska depicts Benita Galeana as an exceptional individual among Mexican women, strengthening the book's claim to status as straight autobiography. In contrast, Mario Gill's prologue describes his wife as "singular" and "mexicanísima," a heroic militant and a woman "of the people." Many readings of Latin American testimonio discuss the simultaneously exceptional and representative nature of its protagonists, a feature which establishes its affiliation with and its difference from traditional autobiography.

Ilan Stavans uses his foreword to the English translation to mount a diatribe against the lionizing of Frida Kahlo and her "noxious impact on everyday life" (1994, 7), and to lament the short supply of "forthright, candid women" in Mexican history (8). For Stavans, Galeana represents the polar opposite of everything that he detests in Kahlo: fakery, passivity, histrionics, exhibitionism. In contrast, Galeana embodies the virtues of sincerity, authenticity and understated courage, which accounts for her remaining a "footnote in history" (10) according to the critic. Stavans's attempt to praise Galeana by denigrating Kahlo may prove to be a distraction from engaging in a reading of Benita that pays attention to its heterogeneous merits and messages. For example, in setting up Kahlo as an icon of the "inauthentic" Europeanized Mexican in contrast to Benita Galeana's status as her "authentic" double, Stavans falls into two traps. First he advances a naive and discredited notion of an authentic, natural popular subject "untainted" by "foreign" values. Second, in order to maintain the absolute dichotomy between

the two women, he must overlook the matter of Galeana's strong loyalty to the imported Stalinist ideology of the Mexican Communist Party of the 1920s and beyond.

Benita can be read as a potential (even if unrealized) precursor to testimonio in many other ways as well. The subject position of the writer-narrator-protagonist declares that this is a history narrated from the margins and in opposition to hegemonic forms of power and discourse. To the degree that the "truth effect" of testimonio is enhanced by the marginal literacy of its speaking and acting subject, Benita can claim this privilege too.<sup>9</sup> The struggle for power is both an extratextual motivation for Galeana's writing, and a central theme of the narrative itself, which arises from a situation of personal and collective crisis in that struggle. In Benita the Mexican government's violent suppression of the PCM is an open wound in the narrator's memory. Finally, I would call attention to the last chapter of the 1940 edition, the book's lost chapter. "Bajo la Bandera de la Internacional" is a call to arms, an explicit appeal to consciousness and to action. Because testimonio is conceived as an extension of the subject's political and social militancy, a similar call to action is frequently present. "Bajo la Bandera" also makes explicit the confessional dimension of the text. In the Catholic practice of confession, which is a founding discourse of Western autobiography, a priest reinterprets and regulates the experiences confessed according to the normative codes of the Church. Communism has also used confession for purposes of disempowerment and control. Here the narrator interprets her life as a journey from ignorance, submission and error to understanding, militancy and confidence, and she calls on other Mexican women to join the struggle for liberation. She confesses that her relationship with Humberto Padilla was a personal defeat because he tried to contain her and alienate her from the Party and from her working-class roots. She resolves never to fall into the same error. "No volveré a tener más esas recaídas. A lo menos en esa clase de amor . . . que embrutece y destruye la personalidad" (1940, 237). A monolithic and doctrinaire call for social change through one exclusive channel, international communism, "Bajo la Bandera" is far less interesting than other parts of the life story, but it should be restored and read as part of the whole as Benita Galeana thought and wrote it.

The title of Elizabeth Bruss's important early study of autobiography, Autobiographical Acts, theorizes that autobiographical narrative is, above all, an act of interpretation and creation that invests the self and the past with meaning. George Yúdice puts a political spin on a similar point when he states that the speaker in testimonio "performs an act of identity-formation that is both personal and collective" and that is tied to survival itself (42). But as powerful as the autobiographical or testimonial assertion of agency may be, self-interpretation and creation are not acts of freedom carried out by autonomous, self-determining, freely speaking individuals. In any use of language the speaking or writing subject is both empowered and constrained by his or her access to the discourses of their culture. Subjectivity does not exist prior to or outside of language, and narrative subjects do not exist prior to the act of narrating their story. In Paul Ricoeur's concise phrase, "the subject is never given at the beginning" (132). Structuralist and post-structuralist theory encourages us to think about the irreducible role of language and of discursive practices in constituting human subjectivity and our acts of perception, memory and communication. Feminist theory explores the particular relationship that women hold to language in patriarchy. Women's subordinate position, her unequal access to power and her consignment to the space of silence are additional and significant constraints on her self-expression. For reasons of gender, class, ethnicity and political affiliation, Benita Galeana lived and wrote from the margins of power and its discourses in early twentieth-century Mexico. But she did not remain silent, and her autobiography gives us the opportunity to examine the

languages that constitute her narrative voice and to see that the relationship of discourse to subjectivity is neither monolithic nor deterministic, but fluid and reciprocal.

Benita Galeana did not structure her story on the basis of literary precedents. She neither imitates nor subverts traditional autobiographical writing in any direct way for the simple reason that she had no access to it. Nonetheless, patriarchy in all of its national variants offers certain life scripts for women, certain stories that they may enact or, exceptionally, modify or reject. The life narrated in *Benita* responds to the shaping pressure of patriarchal ideology, and it also pushes back against it. Within the overarching reality of male dominance and female subordination, two or perhaps three specific discursive practices are fundamental to Galeana's narrative voice. They are the popular oral story-telling tradition of her childhood, the language of Soviet-style communism of the 1930s, and to a lesser extent, I believe, the Catholic confessional. In the rest of this paper I will focus on how Galeana, writing against and in obedience to patriarchy, also inscribes an obedient and a resistant notion of communist ideology into her narrative.

The thirty short chapters of *Benita* are divided into two long sections, "La infancia" and "En la lucha." "La infancia," about one third of the text, covers approximately the years 1904-24, and "En la lucha" picks up in 1924 and carries the story through to 1938 or early 1939. Although the narrative is chronological, moving from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood with very few anachronisms, time is only weakly accounted for. The story develops for long periods without measuring the passing of time or marking it with milestones such as dates or the protagonist's age. Within the annual cycle, significant days such as Independence Day, Christmas and May 1st are sometimes recalled, but the year is rarely noted. This is particularly true in the chapters of "La infancia," and it is a logical consequence of very limited contact with the world beyond the village. "En la lucha" is almost equally vague, but references to Mexico's presidents and to historical events help the reader reconstruct a rough timeline of Benita's activities from 1924 to 1938.

The protagonist of *Benita* is constantly on the move, and her narrative recreates the ancient metaphor of the journey of life. Benita's life journey takes her from the tiny village of San Gerónimo, Guerrero to Acapulco, to Mexico City, to Chiapas and finally back to the capital. In each locale she wanders from one dwelling to another, first as a dependent minor harbored by older sisters and aunts, later as a woman kept by one or another male partner, and intermittently scraping together a precarious living on her own. Emerging from the repeating pattern of travel and change within the same usually dire circumstances, is a story of ascendance, of movement up and out of suffering and defeat toward liberation. The most important journeys taken by the protagonist are those from threat of extinction to survival, silence to speech, alienation to militancy, and loneliness to solidarity through a combination of her own wit and patient rebelliousness and her association with the PCM.

"La infancia" narrates Benita's impoverished childhood under the abusive tutelage of her older sister Camila. After the death of their mother when Benita was two, Camila took charge of her younger siblings. Their father was also present in the household, and Benita portrays him with warm affection. He died when she was six years old, leaving her entirely at her sister's bidding. Hard work, frequent beatings, material want and lack of schooling define a scenario of victimization and hopelessness for the young protagonist. Within that scenario Benita dreams of escape: escape from familial oppression through marriage, and escape from the desperate, confining geography of her birthplace via migration to Mexico City. While she dreams, she also actively explores her limited options for self-improvement, with little initial success. Once she raises a suckling pig in order to buy a gold necklace with the profit from its sale. Before she can



carry out the plan, Camila secretly butchers the pig. Later she tries to run away from San Gerónimo with a few other discontented girls, but their families chase them down and punish them severely for their daring. Rebellion, which society may admire in boys and men, is almost always dangerous for a woman. Her first real break comes when a sister living in Acapulco returns home for a visit and, over Camila's violent objections, takes Benita back to the coast with her. A constant theme of "La infancia" is the hope of meeting a stranger to marry her and take her to Mexico City. Benita's first boyfriends appear in the chapters about Acapulco, and a decisive turning point occurs when she accepts an offer of engagement from a young office worker, and later has a child with him out of wedlock before the relationship breaks off.

It is not hard to recognize the patriarchal mythology of brave male heroes and beautiful (virgin) damsels in distress in Benita's daydreams of escape. She conceives of her individual liberation in highly conventional terms according to the limited scripts available to a poor young woman, and so far her story seems to have little in common with the testimonial challenge to the *status quo*. This challenge becomes increasingly visible in the second part of the autobiography, but already in "La infancia" there are moments that reveal the imperfect fit between the particular exigencies and experiences of the individual's life and society's expectations. The narrator's portrayal of her father is a case in point. As the first eligible knight in shining armor in her life, Benita characterizes her father as generous, loving and protective in contrast to her cruel older sister, and she identifies with him. He is further romanticized as the inconsolable widower who ceaselessly grieves his wife's death. At the same time, equally compelling evidence attests to his frequent absences, bouts of heavy drinking and careless management of what remained of the family's once extensive properties. Weak and irresponsible, he is incapable of rescuing his younger daughter from Camila's harsh treatment. In writing her life story, Galeana tries, consciously or not, to rescue her father from failure and censure. Her professions of love are direct and profuse in contrast to the indirect and rationalizing depiction of his neglect. Here and in other places in the book, Benita casts the male as hero even as she sames him from himself, which is an exemplary, if unknowing reflection on the predicament of women under patriarchy.

Late in the first section Benita travels throughout Guerrero in the company of a mescalero. In one deserted location they are attacked by a band of soldiers loyal to the minor rebel leader Rosalío Radilla. This episode is another example of how Benita finds herself in the position of rescuing her male protector, when she uses her wit and courage to free the mescalero from the rebels. The anecdote also allows us an infrequent opportunity to date an event in her life by using verifiable historical allusions. The name Rosalío Radilla, shouted out by his men as they attack, calls to Benita's mind their recent assassination Escudero brothers. Juan and Felipe Escudero were supporters of Rodolfo Neri, the governor of Guerrero from 1921 to 1924, and an advocate of agrarian reform and workers' rights. Neri was also a distant relative of Benita. The Escuderos were killed in December 1923, which leads me to conclude that Benita abandons the mescalero and makes her way to Mexico City (with money stolen from him) sometime in 1924. By now her daughter, who has been living in Acapulco with the paternal grandmother, would be about three or four years old.

In Mexico City Benita is anxious to save enough money to retrieve her little girl, and after failing as a servant, she works for a time as a barmaid in an establishment called "El Viejo Jalisco." She also enters into several short-term alliances with men, including a common-law marriage with a taxi driver who becomes a member of the PCM. When he is arrested at a May 1st demonstration, other Party members contact Benita for help in winning his release from jail. It is significant that Benita's introduction to communism comes through an appeal to her roles as

wife and mother. Her economic dependency and her loyalty to Manuel, who has promised to send her for her child, are factors that make her receptive to the communist cause. The outstanding episodes of the rest of the book covering the period from 1927 or 1928 to 1938 have to do with her militant activism in the communist movement. During the Cárdenas presidency (1934-40) she also lived for a little over a year in Chiapas with her engineer husband, Humberto Padilla. The story comes to an end back in Mexico City after her break-up with him, and it tells of her return to activism in the now-legal Party and her work as a postal employee and a member of their union.

The Mexican Communist Party was established in 1919 by the leaders of the Socialist Party of Mexico and a delegate of the Soviet Comintern, Manabendra Nath Roy. The USSR quickly gave official recognition to the new party, and a strong alliance with the Comintern and unconditional support for Stalinism characterized the communist movement in Mexico when Benita Galeana became a militant member. Although it was founded during the period of consolidation of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, none of the important revolutionary leaders allied themselves with the PCM. As the Mexican labor movement began to develop the Party opposed the alliance of the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM) with the U.S. American Federation of Labor, and demonizing the CROM as a tool of foreign capitalism became a stock-in-trade of its politics and its rhetoric. The PCM never gained a broad base of support among urban workers, although it tried repeatedly to make inroads into the more liberal unions of textile workers, brewers, bakers, telephone company workers and streetcar operators. Among peasants its influence was virtually nonexistent, and nation-wide it never became a viable alternative to the CROM. By 1923 a group of intellectuals and artists including Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Xavier Guerrero had joined the Party. They founded the PCM newspaper El Machete in 1924 and bankrolled party activities out of their personal funds.<sup>10</sup>

In Benita the narrator describes her political awakening in a moment of crisis: her first arrest and imprisonment when advocating for her husband's freedom at a rally. She recalls that in jail, "viendo la injusticia que cometían conmigo, empecé a pensar que entonces mi marido también estaba preso por una causa justa y que yo debía seguir el camino de él: luchar por los demás, por los pobres, por los oprimidos" (1990, 76). Her new political and social consciousness led her to work on behalf of the Party by distributing pamphlets in factories, attending marches and demonstrations, meeting with her cell, hawking El Machete on the streets and giving speeches at impromptu meetings and at planned events. Galeana joined the PCM just at the time that it was declared illegal and subjected to severe repression under the governments of Emilio Portes Gil (1928-30) and Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-32). During these years PCM leaders were routinely set to the infamous prison of Islas Marías in Sinaloa, and the Party offices were sacked and their press destroyed. El Machete went underground in the fall of 1929 and it continued to appear about every two weeks during the period of prohibition (until 1935), at great risk to those who, like Benita Galeana, distributed it. Poniatowska lifts a phrase from the text as the title for her introduction. "Agarren a Benita" commemorates Galeana's reported 58 arrests and imprisonments in the period between 1929 and 1934. In her confrontations with police and in prison, Benita invents numerous ways of subverting their authority and the prison regimen. Once, in order to delay and perhaps even avoid being transferred to a more isolated and secure prison, she strips and waits naked in her cell, much to the astonishment of the prison matrons. In a more serious vein, she also participates in hunger strikes to protest against prison conditions and the detention of political prisoners.

In her 1987 book A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, Sidonie Smith examines the problematics of gender in autobiographical writing and criticism. In her chapter on "The Engenderings of Self-Representation" she describes three ways in which the autobiographer may resolve the dilemma of self-representation from the marginal position of woman. Benita seem to inscribe the first of these narrative models. According to Smith, the woman autobiographer may assume the postures traditionally associated with male selfhood under patriarchy. In adopting the male script, she will represent herself as an autonomous, adventurous and unique individual and identify with the father while repressing the mother and daughter in her. Her narrative will tacitly accept the fictions of man as the positively valued ideal and the fictions of women's inferiority. Smith notes, however, that a woman will never be wholly successful in rewriting herself as a representative man, and her life story will betray her dilemma.

In Benita the narrator-protagonist already displays an "unfeminine" vocation for self-defense and rebellion in childhood. Her determination to escape family and village life and her aggressive refusal of her much older brother-in-law's sexual advances, for example, are acts of self-affirmation that go beyond mere survival. Her rebellion against patriarchal social structures takes typically masculine forms: running away from home and fighting off her brother-in-law with a machete. At the same time she clings to the hope of being rescued by a man who will be her lover and her protector. Once she joins the PCM she enthusiastically assimilates the male script of political militancy. Her narrative voice is inflected with language absorbed from El Machete, other PCM pamphlets and the speeches that she frequently heard, and she wholeheartedly adopts the ideology of workers' rights and world revolution according to her limited understanding of it.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the predominant message of Benita is one of gratitude and unconditional support for communism as represented by the PCM, and the structure of the individual life story traces an ascending, triumphalist movement that is well in line with promises of collective liberation through popular struggle. In the PCM Benita finds opportunities for activism and she develops a sense of social justice that would have been unthinkable in the confines of rural San Gerónimo. Her gratitude is in some senses well justified, but in spite of the benefits of her association with the PCM, Benita cannot escape the fact of her ambiguous and ultimately subordinate position in the Party organization.

As a result, Benita portrays herself in a dual role vis-à-vis the PCM. On the one hand, she has realized her rescue scenario with the heroic male Party taking the place of the husband that she formerly sought. As a rescued, redeemed woman she voices her grateful obedience to the Party line. On the other hand, she is a militant hero in her own right and an engaging public speaker who has experienced the excitement of drawing a crowd and holding them with her voice. As such, and given the tensions that persistent class and gender subordination must create within a context of a struggle for liberation, the narrator also engages in critical questioning of the Party. A recurring theme is the regret and resentment triggered by the way that PCM leaders neglect her education and refuse to help her find employment after Padilla leaves her. "Ya sé que no soy nadie en el Partido. Un miembro de fila, atrasada políticamente. Pero nunca sentí que los dirigentes del Partido mostraran ningún interés por encauzarme . . . He sentido que me han dejado sola con mi ignorancia" (1990, 115). She also criticizes the in-fighting, the frequent purges of Party members, and the double standard of sexual conduct perpetuated even by "camaradas muy capaces e inteligentes" (115). Although these passages of direct criticism are relatively infrequent and the final call to arms of "Bajo la Bandera" may dull their force, a careful reading of the text will detect these and other moments of resistance.

Finally, the text's silences are as powerful as its words in constructing the autobiographical I, torn between embracing the militant's role and experiencing her gendered exclusion from full participation. Benita has a small child, and while they are separated the hope of regaining custody is a constant theme and a principal reason for seeking work and/or accepting support from a man. After they are reunited, her daughter apparently lives with her in Mexico City throughout the late 1920s and 30s, but curiously she is less visible in the text now than when she was absent. The reader learns virtually nothing about her, not even her name. Other more transient characters--police officers, Party comrades--occupy space in the text. The narrator may give them a bit of dialogue, tell their name, sketch out an identifying physical characteristic or personality trait. Even though Benita is the central character on every page, she does surround herself with visible, identifiable others, expect her daughter. One could speculate on psychological reasons--perhaps the topic is too personal or too painful or the sense of guilt too great. That might make sense given the likely trauma of raising a child in uncertain and dangerous circumstances that include being hauled off to jail on a regular basis. But without even having to speculate, an answer emerges from the analysis that I have begun to develop here. A daughter simply has no identifiable place and no identifiable name in the life story that takes shape in Benita. As Adrienne Rich showed us so poignantly and so powerfully in Of Woman Born, the discourses of patriarchy in the West have precious little to say about mothers and daughters. Certainly the rhetoric of Stalinism in its most cliched forms wouldn't have provided Benita with the words to speak of her daughter, and her rebellion did not reach far enough to invent them. It is one thing to remember and even protest against a problem that has a name. It is a far more difficult intellectual and linguistic task to remember and recreate what lies outside of our habits of speech. In all likelihood, Benita Galeana nurtured her daughter, knew her well, spoke with her often. Nonetheless, in writing her autobiography the codes at her disposal did not give access to a language that could inscribe the mother-daughter relationship.

In the opening of the paper I raised the complicated question of who speaks in mediated testimonial literature. In this analysis we can see that the question of voice is equally complicated for a testimonial autobiography authored more or less directly by its subject. There are two principal reasons for this. First, reception of Benita Galeana's text is framed by the intervention of others in ways that we cannot ignore. Second, and more importantly, Galeana's writing of her life story, her creation of a "voice of her own," is necessarily shaped--empowered and constrained--by the socially constructed discourses of her culture and the power relations that they describe and enforce. I do not mean to suggest that this is a unique situation for subaltern subjects, who might otherwise be "free" to speak naturally, spontaneously and transparently about their "authentic" experiences. It is a situation common to all human subjects, although when saying about any particular subject that it is necessary and right to acknowledge our different and unequal relations to the discourses of power.

In conclusion, I would suggest that "speaking from the soapbox" is a fitting trope for Benita Galeana's position as a writer of a testimonial autobiography. In the book, Benita literally climbs up on the vegetable crates to claim a public site of speaking within a historical situation of exclusion and silence. She grasps the tools that are ready at hand--the engendered mythologies of patriarchy and the often cliched language of communism as it appeared in El Machete--and she makes the most of this limited repertoire. As a platform, the political soapbox symbolizes extemporaneous and improvisational speech, as well as a repetitive dogmatism of ideas. It has the virtue of being readily available and the defect of be easily overturned. It is, finally, a precarious perch, but as Galeana steps up on the soapbox of Party loyalty--and occasionally falls

off of it into criticism--she makes a valuable contribution to the expanding possibilities of women's life-writing.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the most widely read and exhaustively studied mediated testimonies such as Biografía de un cimarrón, Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia, and Si me permiten hablar... Testimonio de Domitila.

<sup>2</sup> Elzbieta Sklodowska provides a detailed and insightful critique of Barnet's several essays on testimonio in her 1994 book Testimonio hispanoamericano: Historia, teoría, poética. Barnet's 1969 essay appeared in the journal Unión vol. 6, #4. It was also used as a prologue to a 1970 edition of Canción de Rachel and it has been reprinted in the volume edited by René Jara and Hernán Vidal which I have included in my list of works cited. The page numbers for textual quotes correspond to the Jara and Vidal volume.

<sup>3</sup> The matter of Benita Galeana's year of birth is a source of some confusion and I have seen three dates published: 1903, 1904, 1907. I do not know of archival research to support one date over the others. The lack of a birth certificate for a child born in a small village early in the century is not surprising. As an adult member of the workforce Galeana applied to the governor of Guerrero for documentation. She told me that this paperwork lists her birth year incorrectly as 1907 and that she was actually born in 1904. The 1904 date makes better sense in terms of dating her activities and calculating her age at certain critical turning points of her life. When I interviewed her in June 1994 she spoke of being 90 years old, going on 91.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the paper I will refer to the historical woman as Benita Galeana or Galeana, and only call the narrator-protagonist of the text by the first name alone, Benita. It is still common in writing about testimonial literature to refer to women testimonialistas by their first name (Rigoberta and Domitila, for example), while this is not the case for male testimonial subjects. No one writes about Esteban (Montejo) or Omar (Cabezas). Men are consistently referred to by surname.

<sup>5</sup> For reasons of economy I will sometimes use the abbreviation PCM to refer to the Mexican Communist Party.

<sup>6</sup> I have used the pagination of the 1940 edition when quoting from two sections that are missing from later editions: the "Palabras preliminares" and the final chapter of the book, "Bajo la Bandera de la Internacional." Other textual quotes in Spanish come from the 1990 Lince edition or, in English, from the 1994 translation. I will specify the date in the body of the text when necessary for clarity.

<sup>7</sup> This last sentence is virtually an exact quote from the autobiography written 54 years earlier.

<sup>8</sup> A number of years ago when I first heard about Benita I requested it through my university's interlibrary loan service. Although I didn't specify the first edition, to my good fortune a 1940 book was located and shipped, giving me what I later learned was a rare

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opportunity to compare it to the more recent editions. Galeana herself did not have a copy in her possession in 1994, and I left her photocopies that I had made of the “Palabras preliminares” and the engravings of 1940. Amy Diane Prince apparently did not know about the discrepancies among the different editions while working on the English translation, which she based on the 1990 Lince text.

<sup>9</sup>See John Beverley, “The Margin at the Center” (15).

<sup>10</sup> See Barry Carr, Marxism and Communism in Mexico.

<sup>11</sup> In the book and in our interview Galeana attests to the fact that other PCM members read El Machete aloud to her.

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