

Reclaiming and Asserting Human Rights in Testimonio Genre: A Critical Study

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In *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions* (2015) Gillian Whitlock has asserted that the European Enlightenment and the meteoric growth of empire in the eighteenth century have been instrumental in bringing about a “change in sensibilities towards an awareness of the suffering of other living things—both human and animal” (16). Whitlock has defined this phenomenon as the ‘Humanitarian Revolution’ which was closely associated with campaigns “to ameliorate the suffering of those without social power: women, servants, children, slaves, indigenous peoples, peasants, prisoners, animals” (16). Whitlock writes:

Its concerns seem distinctively contemporary now: an ethical turn to recognition of distant strangers, debates about empathic engagement with others and compassionate concern for their suffering, a turn to testimonial narrative and bearing witness for those who testify on behalf of others, an appeal to what we now call ‘rights discourse.’ (16-17)

Whitlock maintains that literature executes a crucial part in the evolution of sensibility in this humanitarian revolution: “there was a rapid rise in literacy during this period, and the role of the novel and poetry in the ‘invention of the human’ is demonstrable” (17). When literature and human rights evince an inextricable association, the emphasis is focussed on the narrative. The proliferation of human rights discourse has time and again been connected with the novel. Lynn Hunt in *Inventing Human Rights* (2007) establishes the fact that the emergence of the human rights sensibility and the sentimental novel are inseparably connected. Joseph Slaughter’s ground-breaking study *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form and International Law* (2007) has presented a trenchant critique of the discourse of human rights and declared how the literary form of the *Bildungsroman* is connected with international human rights law.

Besides novel and poetry, various forms of life writing exhibit an inextricable relationship with human rights.¹ These diverse manifestations of life writing comprise, but are not restricted to, autobiography, memoir, and the Latin American form-- testimonio. The paper endeavours to concentrate on testimonio—the narrative genre which explores stories of suffering and emancipation. As a distinctive form of resistance literature, testimonial narratives² communicate a message of protest and are considered a “weapon on the cultural front” (Gugelberger and Kearney 9). Human rights discourse is, in fact, embedded in the cultural milieu. Cultural texts interspersed in numerous genres, tell stories of denial of human rights as well as the sincere efforts to reclaim those rights. The paper attempts to highlight that the testimonio genre creates discursive frameworks to rewrite the history of the oppressed communities, regain awareness of their cultural heritage, and most importantly reclaim human rights for the deprived and dispossessed people. Whitlock contends, “In testimonial narrative a narrator speaks publicly on behalf of the many who have suffered, and lays claim to truth and authenticity in accounts of social suffering” (67). She has also remarked that a testimonial life narrative is a potent tool in campaigns for social justice. In fact, “it demands recognition, advocacy, responsibility, and accountability” (203). Through

these politically-charged life narratives, the writers are rendering voice and visibility to the voiceless and invisible people in the world. Indeed, testimonio has become “an important, perhaps the dominant, form of literary narrative in Latin America” (Beverley, “Through All Things Modern” 45). It can also be said that testimonio is not something like a documentary kind of writing. Commenting on the relationship between Holocaust Studies and Latin American works on testimony Georg Gugelberger, a critic of testimonio narrative, writes, “Most certainly we do not wish to identify Holocaust testimonies, which are basically documentary, with the testimonio that wants to effect change and is quite different from documentary writing” (4). Indeed, testimonio is not only about suffering, pain, discrimination and repression, but also about the reconstruction of the self along with the community.³

Every testimonio represents a story—a story that furthers the advocacy of rights. James Dawes argues:

Many of the most recognizable organizations that intervene in humanitarian crises do so in large part by using language instead of food, medicine, or weapons; the most important act of rescue for them is not delivering supplies but asking questions, evaluating answers, and pleading with those of us who observe from a distance. (394)

Dawes asserts the efficacy of storytelling which provides the fundamental vocabulary and forms of human rights. Needless to say, of these storytelling forms, testimonio is one of the pervasive narrative genres. Testimonios celebrate the stories of rights being grossly violated and vehemently denied and rights assertively reclaimed through resilience and passionate resistance. Testimonio has its origin in Latin American countries in the cold-war era and was further evolved in connection with the blatant encroachment on human rights throughout the world.

John Beverley, the doyen of testimonio writings defined testimonio in the following way. Beverley writes:

By testimonio I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet ... form, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant life experience. (“The Margin” 30-31)

In “The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio” Beverley has cogently observed that “testimonio coalesced as a new narrative genre in the 1960s and further developed in close relation to the movements for national liberation and the generalized cultural radicalism of that decade” (31). In this essay, he has also stated, “The situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself” (32). One of the foremost reasons that contributed to the emergence and expansion of the testimonio narrative is that these personal stories of violence, poverty, and suffering told by marginalized and oppressed people always coexist with the political message. Another most frequently quoted definition of testimonio was presented by George Yúdice. He writes,

[T]estimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or

her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history. (44)

Latin American testimonio was originated in Cuba with the publication of Miguel Barnet's *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave* in 1966. It records the life of a 105-year-old runaway slave, Esteban Montejo who narrates his past experiences. Barnet edited some important facts from the interviews with Montejo to write an authentic tale of struggle and survival. After its origin in Cuba, testimonio narrative was spread in Central America and further evolved in response to the 1970s military repression in Latin America for example, Argentina's dirty war. Women writers have quite successfully employed this narrative genre. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984) by Rigoberta Menchú trenchantly criticizes military torture on indigenous Guatemalans. Similarly, Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival* (1986) exposes the torture meted out by the despotic military government in the Argentinian prison.

Beverley explains that "The Spanish word *testimonio* translates literally as 'testimony', as in the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense"⁴ ("The Margin" 32). Here the writers perform the pivotal role of witnesses who expose the conspiracies and mechanism of the perpetrators of violence, thereby initiating advocacy and activism on behalf of oppressed people. John Beverley has stated that testimonio "permits the entry into literature of persons who would normally—in those societies (most) where literature is a form of class privilege—be excluded from direct literary expression, who have had to be represented by professional writers" (*Against Literature*, 76). Testimonios are written by the authors who belong to the oppressed class, subjugated by the dominant sections of the society which have always denied them modes of representation. Testimonios offer these authors an opportunity to express their experiences of subjugation and retaliation and claim a right to speak, to be heard and solicit justice. The aspect of testimonio genre to impart voice to the oppressed section of society makes it acquire the characteristic feature of postmodernity. As Yúdice argues:

Testimonial writing, in this respect, coincides with one of the fundamental tenets of postmodernity: the rejection of what Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) calls grand or master narratives, which function to legitimize "political or historical teleologies, ... or the great 'actors' and 'subjects' of history—the nation-state, the proletariat, the party, the West, etc." (according to Jameson 1984b, xii). (43-44)

As a socio-political and cultural narrative testimonio is a living record of the agony and suffering of a particular self along with the community. Atrocity perpetrated on a particular community can also be documented in full-fledged canonical history, but history is generally a detached objective narrative. However, testimonio is neither detached nor it is objective. Testimonio is intensely subjective and involved. Testimonio is a kind of eternal agony which is very much experiential, subjective and is embedded in a kind of consciousness of the marginalized. History, on the contrary, does not explore that consciousness. In fact, testimonio inculcates a collective consciousness about inhuman torture, oppression, genocide, and other such modes of human rights violations.

In "The Margin at the Centre" (2004) John Beverley asserts that, "testimonio offers a kind of answer to the problem of women's access to literature" (41). Echoing Sidonie Smith,

Beverley has observed that every woman who writes her experience “finally interrogates the ideology of gender that lies behind the engendering of self in forms such as the novel or autobiography” (41). Testimonios of women authors unmask the oppression based on gender. In fact, testimonios of women authors underscore the necessity of considering women as humans and the need for human rights discourse to recognize the claims of women. Since time immemorial, women have been relegated to the periphery. Kimberly A. Nance has mentioned how in a 1986 essay, Ariel Dorfman studied several Chilean texts and pondered on the dearth of women writers of testimonio, assuming what must have seemed an “obvious etymological coincidence” (Nance 145). “[T]estimony’ comes from ‘testes’,” Dorfman wrote, “testicles in Latin....” He explained:

[t]o testify, to tell the truth, was originally related to virility, to speak with the capacity to father children. It is worth mentioning here, as a kind of parenthesis, a sad appendix, that there are no women among those who have written of their experience in captivity (quoted in Nance 145-46)

Saporta Sternbach likewise claimed that the fact of “testigo (and therefore testimonio)” being derived from “*testes*” has excluded women “both legally and anatomically” (92, emphasis in original). Furthermore, “the word testigo has no feminine form in Spanish” and, therefore, “when women are witnesses, they must be referred to as ‘la testigo’” (92). It inevitably follows that “since women do not have testicles, they cannot really be qualified to testify—give evidence” (Saporta Sternbach 98n). However, to tie up testimonio with ‘testes’ is quite controversial. As Kimberly A. Nance elaborates:

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed., 1989) confirms a link between *testimony* and *testis* in the legal sense (Latin ‘witness’), but not the derivation that Dorfman posits (the anatomical sense of *testis* as a source of the legal sense). ...The 4th edition of the *World Heritage Dictionary* (2000) reports that the legal sense of *testis* is the earlier one, and the anatomical sense a later addition, not a source. (189 n)

To substantiate her argument, Nance then proceeds to quote from the *World Heritage Dictionary*:

The resemblance between testimony, testify, testis, and testicle shows an etymological relationship, but linguists are not agreed on precisely how English *testis* came to have its current meaning. The Latin *testis* originally meant “witness,” and etymologically means “third (person) standing by”: the *te-* part comes from an older *tri-*, a combining form of the word for “three,” and *-stis* is a noun derived from the Indo- European root *sta-* meaning “stand.” How this also came to refer to the body part (s) is disputed. (qtd. in Nance 189n; emphasis in original)

It becomes evident that the etymological sense of the word testimonio does not necessarily entail the exclusion of women though some scholars (like Dorfman emphasizing perhaps the anatomical sense) think otherwise. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that women have been excluded and they were not given adequate importance as witnesses throughout the world. Women do not find protection of the law as do men. They are the victims by state mechanism, class, caste, and gender discrimination. In fact, Linda S. Maier has aptly commented that “in consideration of women’s generic exclusion from testimonial discourse,

their appropriation of the genre and ascendancy appear all the more noteworthy” (3). Therefore, testimonios function as discursive frameworks that interrogate the question of gender. However, it would be inappropriate to circumscribe these testimonios within the enclosed area of the gender issue. Indigeneity, class, caste, apartheid and other parameters of human rights violations are explored and analysed by the women authors in their testimonios as well. Therefore, Beverley concluded, “Many of the best-known testimonios are in the voices of women,” yet “testimonio does not produce textually an essentialized ‘woman’s experience’” (“The Margin” 41). Vicki Roman-Lagunas, an authority in Latin American literature and culture, contends that the Latin American women testimonio writers vehemently defy the attempt to categorize them as feminists (113). Notwithstanding the opposition and reluctance of the female writers, the testimonio genre becomes “the most explicit example of an expanded notion of feminism” (Roman-Lagunas 114). As Vicki Roman-Lagunas elucidated, in these texts “women narrate not only their own true stories of victimization (as receivers) but also their experiences as prime movers belonging to and representing marginalized social sectors” (114). Indeed, the First World texts written by mainstream feminists focus on the experience of women exploited by the male-dominated, patriarchal system, while the testimonios of Latin American women focus on “all exploited individuals—both male and female—who have been oppressed by a system characterized by both social imperialism and patriarchy” (Lagunas 114). The testimonios of women writers have accentuated the fact that notwithstanding massive impediments born out of class, caste and gender thrust on the women, they have been successful in generating a sincere effort to reconstruct the society. The testimonios of the women writers “evinced a strong awareness of the multiple roles the women must occupy as they shift between gendered cultural positions and the extreme leveling force of state terror and violence” (Cubilié 41).

I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala (1984) written by Rigoberta Menchú is one such paradigmatic testimonio that focussed on military oppression meted out to the indigenous population in Guatemala. Menchú’s testimonio published originally in Spanish in 1983 and translated into English in 1984, “chronicled the means through which the ruling elites and the military sustained their power and maintained their control over the Quiche Indian population⁵ through physical violence, economic dependency, and cultural denigration” (Schaffer and Smith 29). It attempts to explore the fiery resistance and resilience of the indigenous community to combat authoritarian regime. For their revolutionary activities, Menchú’s family was victimized by the despotic military government. Her father was incarcerated, her mother was raped, and her brother was mercilessly persecuted by the Guatemalan military government. As a narrative genre which is integrally associated with delineating human rights violation, testimonio necessarily entails the existence of a witness who narrates the predicament faced by the oppressed people. Here Menchú had to witness the terrible mass slaughter in villages. With her testimonio Menchú initiated widespread activism for the dispossessed and repressed indigenous people in Guatemala. As a consequence of her advocacy and activism, the grave situation of Guatemala has improved significantly. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith have opined,

The attention generated by the *testimonio* produced an aura-effect around Menchú herself, elevating and legitimating the Quiche woman as an international authority on the struggles of indigenous peoples. In 1992 Menchú was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, international acknowledgment that brought increased sympathy for her cause and increased interest in her narrative. (29)

The grim reality of her people made Menchú politically conscious and through her testimonio she attempts to inculcate this consciousness not only among her community but among the sincere readers as well.

The genre testimonio belongs to the survivor, the one who has gone through the suffering with an undaunted spirit and articulated it as a narrative. One of the foremost characteristics of testimonio narrative is that it functions as a witness-text—a text which is organically related to witnessing. Leigh Gilmore has reiterated the efficacy of witnessing. She asserts that the “power of the first-person witness thus rests on both the singularity and the wider representative capacity of the witness” (146). She has emphasized the communal responsibility of this narrative genre. She explains that “in speaking to and for many, first-person accounts expand human rights beyond the frame of the individual” (146). These first-person narratives “speak to state-sponsored violence, environmental degradation, and extraordinary need” (146). Kelly Oliver writes that the loss of subjectivity is the inevitable outcome of human rights violations. However, the writers reverse the process of annihilation of subjectivities through witnessing the atrocities, speaking out against them and writing down their experiences. Oliver categorically states:

Being othered, oppressed, subordinated, or tortured affects a person at the level of her subjectivity, her sense of herself as a subject and agent. Oppression and subordination render individuals or groups of people as other by objectifying them. Objectification undermines subjectivity: to put it simply, objects are not subjects. Through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects. (7)

This is the reason why Beverley has asserted that “testimonio has been, in Latin America and elsewhere,” the narrative form of “both revolutionary activism” and “defensive struggles for human rights and re-democratization” (“Through All Things Modern” 61). The situations in which the testimonios of Latin American countries and other parts of the world are originated are different, so are the socio-economic, political, regional, linguistic perspectives yet they are assimilated in an experience of suffering, misery, and degradation—the metaphor of human rights violations. In the words of Cubilié, “Through the continual assertion of difference—cultural, class, identitarian, and so on—*testimonio* seeks to construct readers who respect difference and unknowability and who engage in an act of political solidarity with the speaker (s) of the text” (145). The discursive practice of engaging with testimonio attempts to reinforce the fact that, notwithstanding numerous differences, the common factor that encompasses in all the testimonios is the portrayal of torture and violence and the utmost urge of the people to overcome the violence. Beverley has aptly pointed out that “testimonio in this sense has been important in maintaining and developing the practice of international human rights and solidarity movements” (“The Margin” 37).

However, the claim of the effectiveness of testimonio genre is encountered with staunch criticism from some quarters. Donald L. Shaw argues:

[F]rom a critical position perceived as detached ... all such works (testimonio writings) are inevitably reductive, simplistic.... They present a very complex reality in black and white terms which are not always acceptable to a sophisticated readership. (101)

Elzbieta Sklodowska in fact, warns “against a naïve reception of the form” (Beverley “Through All Things Modern” 48). Sklodowska writes:

How can we reconcile a modern sensibility with such an arbitrary view of history and testimonial discourse as an “impartial” incarnation of historical reality? Clearly, from a theoretical standpoint, the testimonial project presents itself in terms of a non-modern consciousness in the sense that it does not include self-doubt nor acknowledge the relativity of its own assumptions. (quoted in Shaw 101)

Gareth Williams’s “The Fantasies of Cultural Exchange in Latin American Subaltern Studies” (1996) regards testimonio as a fantasy in which the act of reading certain texts is assumed to bring social change. In response to these charges, it is pertinent to quote Honduran human rights activist Elvia Alvarado who offers suggestions on how readers might respond to her book, “If you sit around thinking what to do and end up not doing anything,” she scathingly interrogates, “why bother even thinking about it?” (146). Elvia Alvarado mentions it clearly in her testimonio- *Don’t Be Afraid, Gringo* (1987):

We’re not asking for food or clothing or money. We want you with us in the struggle. We want you to educate your people. We want you to organize your people. (146)

Kimberly A. Nance’s ground-breaking book on testimonio narrative, *Can Literature Promote Justice? Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio* (2006) proposes,

As a part of a social project, *testimonio* is not a matter of speaking of one’s suffering for therapeutic, archival, or judicial purposes, but of rather of *speaking of one’s suffering in such a way that readers will be induced to act against the injustice of it.* (90, emphasis in original)

People should be actively involved in bringing about change. It is obvious that testimonio is not a mere narrative genre. Indeed, “it is a project of social justice in which text is an instrument” (Nance 19).

Another crucial charge that has been levelled against testimonio is that it has often been accused of developing a propensity for becoming profitable properties in the contemporary market-friendly world. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith have observed that publishing houses “convert stories of suffering and survival into commodified experiences for general audiences with diverse desires and also for an increasing number of niche audiences interested in particular kinds of suffering” (23). In fact, testimonios are accused of commercializing adversity and hardship. However, to counter this allegation it can be stated that the reception of the testimonio cannot in any way be regulated by the writers. Kimberly A. Nance rightly maintains, “*Testimonio*’s speakers declare emphatically that their projects neither end with the production of the text nor even with its enthusiastic reception” (14). “Instead,” according to Nance, the authors of testimonios “describe the texts as intermediate steps in a process directed toward producing change in the lifeworld” (14). Therefore, the significance of the life narratives cannot be refuted over such charges. Schaffer and Smith have assured, “The meanings generated by individual narratives, and by the collective culture of personal narratives, can become commodified as they enter the global marketplace, but they can also exceed the processes of commodification” (226). In fact, they assert,

“Commodified narratives can also keep a human rights agenda in the public eye when local campaigns fail” (226). In their testimonios, the writers-activists have explored the “human rights deficit” which according to Anne Cubilié, refers to:

[T]he deficit in basic development—such as access to clean drinking water, food, shelter, basic education, health care, and work as well as freedom from violence—that needs to be closed in the country to bring it up to the level where international human rights standards can begin to be broadly applied. (267 n)

Testimonios have accentuated the necessity for advocacy and driven the states to comply with certain norms. Relentless activism on the part of writer-activists pressurizes the states to restore at least some basic rights for the well-being of the citizens. For example, it is pertinent to mention the crucial impact of Menchú’s testimonio. The shocking event that left Rigoberta Menchú devastated was the death of her father and other community members in the fire of the Spanish embassy. On January 31, 1980, a group of dissidents of military government including Menchú’s father Vicente gathered at the Spanish Embassy in Guatemalan highlands. As Spain was sympathetic to their cause, the protesters had congregated in the Spanish Embassy “to protest the abuses committed by security forces against indigenous communities in the Guatemalan highlands” (Gilmore 60-61). But instead of providing any remedy of the grievance, the Guatemalan security forces unleashed unimaginable torture upon the protesters, enclosed the building, sealed the exits, and set it on fire which claimed the lives of thirty-seven protesters and hostages, including embassy staff. Four years after the ghastly incident of the burning of the Spanish embassy, the publication of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonio in English affirmed that the security forces were solely responsible for the deaths of her father and the other community members. In 1999 criminal charges were filed by Menchú in Spain against former government officials responsible for the massacre (Gilmore 61). The widespread impact of her testimonio is reinforced with the verdict in January 2015 when the former police chief of Guatemala City was convicted of “crimes against humanity for his role in the Spanish Embassy fire” resulting in the death of several innocent peasants including Menchú’s father (Gilmore 59). He was sentenced to forty years in prison. All these tremendous feats to bring the perpetrators in the court of law become possible through Menchú’s act of writing which is essentially related to advocacy. Schaffer and Smith point out:

Menchú’s narrative and her extensive activism directed world attention to the plight of the Quiche Indians in Guatemala, contributing to the efforts of indigenous Guatemalans, united in local guerilla resistance movements, to bring an end to state-sponsored massacres and an increased respect for Mayan culture. (29)

It can be said that positive changes in social justice and development have been discerned by the testimonio writings. Promoting empathy testimonios have functioned as powerful tools that can enkindle the works of human rights and interrogate the works of literary and cultural studies in high schools, colleges, and universities, thereby creating a cultural consciousness among the academicians. Emphasis should be given to retrieving the suppressed history of the marginalized community through testimonios. The multilingual, polyphonic scenario of a country creates a hindrance towards documenting the acts of cruelty and violence. Beverley maintains that testimonio is also “a way of putting on the agenda, within a given country, problems of poverty and oppression, for example, in rural areas that are not normally visible

in the dominant forms of representation” (“The Margin” 37). The testimonios which are written in regional languages should be translated into English to make them easily accessible to a wider range of people so that they can know about the glaring infringement of human rights and the spirited resistance and earnest efforts to retrieve those rights. Highlighting in ample measure the transgression of human rights in a particular locality, testimonios inevitably elicit a sincere concern from the responsible citizens. However, it should be borne in mind that soliciting help and intervention should not be equated with charitable works. Charitable works and distributive justice are necessary to ameliorate the suffering of people. Nevertheless, awareness on the part of readers/ listeners and consciousness among the victims are more in need to improve the situation. Cubilié suggests that the reception of the testimonial narratives is integrally related to the response of the readers. In fact, “written testimonials by survivors require” Cubilié asserts, “a willingness” on the part of the readers (10). Cubilié affirms that it is not a “one-way discourse,” instead the “traumatic markers of the text are the ground for a witnessing dynamic between reader and text— and, as such, between author, text, and reader” (10). Discourse has been explained as “...a form of power that circulates in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance” (Diamond and Quinby 185). Here the testimonio narrative operates as a potent vehicle of resistance that condemns and combats “strategies of domination” by the authoritarian regime.

Testimonio is the narrative genre which demands that victims possess a “right” to “tell their own stories,” the “right of framing them from their own perspectives and being recognized as legitimate sources of truth with claims to rights and justice” (Toit 136). “Framing the future of human rights in terms of narration”, Alexandra Schultheis Moore succinctly observes, “focuses attention on the subject constituted by and through her story” (233). Testimonios emphasize the inherent dignity of human beings. They instil the sense of dignity into the minds of both the people around whom those testimonios revolve and the empathetic readers whom they aim to prompt into action. Testimonios give rise to agency, politically aware agency, which may offer a line of optimism and hope even in bleak circumstances.

Notes:

1. The history of interconnections between stories and human rights advocacy can be located in the eighteenth century. According to Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, the life writing which contributed to the adoption of the Geneva Convention was written by Swiss humanitarian Henri Dunant who in *A Memoir of Solferino* (1859) provided the first-hand witness-account of the “carnage of the decisive battle of the Franco-Austrian war,” prompting the “subsequent debates about just and unjust wars,” which ultimately leads “to the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross and the adoption of the Geneva Convention” (28).
2. Life writing, Life narrative, and Testimonial narrative are some of the terms which are used in connection with testimonio. I acknowledge to use the definition of life writing provided by Martina Horakova who in “Contemporary Life Writing: Inscribing Double Voice in Intergenerational Collaborative Life-Writing Projects” (2013) illustrated that the term points to a copious amount of personal narratives that applies “not only coherent and chronological but also fragmented and achronological strategies for telling one’s own or another’s life story” (53). The term consists of “auto/biographical accounts, collaborative oral history projects, and communal and collective life narratives that are told in various modes” including, e.g., memoir, confessional and trauma narratives, testimonios, tribal histories etc. (53). This term as Horakova declares “serves to capture aptly the frequent confluence of writing life and writing history in Indigenous life writing, inscribing both individual and collective identity at the same time” (53).

3. Testimonio has an affinity with autobiography but while autobiography revolves around the augmentation of self, testimonio is intimately associated with inculcating and disseminating collective consciousness. Beverley writes in this connection:

Testimonio is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies that any life so narrated can have a kind of representational value. Each individual testimonio evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences. Thus, one common formal variation on the classic first-person singular testimonio is the polyphonic testimonio, made up of accounts by different participants in the same event. (“The Margin” 34)
4. The term ‘testimony’ generally means giving evidence by the witness in courtroom trials. Anne Cubilié proposes that the term ‘testimony’ “applies within literary, critical, and cultural studies to the witnessing of the specific experience of atrocity... by its survivors” (143). It is part of testimonio but is not synonymous with it. Testimonio is a narrative genre that also presupposes the existence of a witness. Through their testimonios, the writers-activists have been able “to construct an alternative jurisdiction and to enter the jurisdiction of the public sphere through the language of self-representation rather than legal petition” (Gilmore 100).
5. It is quite surprising that even 500 years after the historical blunder of Columbus in assuming the citizens of these lands Indian (he thought that he had discovered India), the indigenous people of Guatemala are still called “Indians.”

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