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# Comics That Cross the Line: The Transnational Narrative Work of Latin American Voices

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The University of Vermont

Comics That Cross the Line:  
The Transnational Narrative Work  
of Latin American Voices

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Advised by Professor John Waldron  
UVM Global & Regional Studies  
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## Introduction

This paper connects comics and the testimonial narrative to analyze how both genres bring marginalized voices to light. In the course of studying the testimonial narrative I was fascinated by the large volume of scholarly work produced by theorists and literary critics regarding the genre, but I worried that I had arrived to the discussion twenty years too late. Even though the debates surrounding the genre continue to this day, the majority of the discourse on testimonial was published in the late twentieth century. When I discovered the new and exciting scholarship surrounding comics, specifically nonfiction comics, I felt that there was a necessary connection waiting to be made between these new discussions and the older scholarship surrounding testimonial literature. My experience with migrant farmworkers here in Vermont led me to the ethnographic cartooning project undertaken by the Vermont Open Door Clinic. The comics produced in these projects function as a new iteration of the testimonial endeavor, granting marginalized voices a space and a platform in much the same manner as the traditional testimonial narrative. With this forty years of scholarship regarding what it means to testify in mind, I argue that the long history of discourse surrounding the testimonial narrative can be productively applied to studying the new and growing field of nonfiction comics. These comics present a powerful way to narrate experiences not generally accessible or familiar to the Western reader, namely those of the migrant farmworker.

In order to speak about marginalized voices, it is necessary first to delineate and explain the power structures that gird the world in which these narratives exist. Following Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, a hegemonic system is formed when a given group establishes dominance in society and creates an interior space of their own that interpellates the subject.

Those who gain entrance into this privileged space are those who comply with the tenets of the imagined community, who act and speak in accordance with the norms put forward by the hegemonic power. These constructed codes of behavior, or norms, comprise the nomos,<sup>1</sup> which includes all rules, habits and expectations that people follow in their quotidian life. In acting in accordance with the nomos, citizens gain entrance into the imagined community as defined by Benedict Anderson.<sup>2</sup> This imagined community, the interior space of hegemony, is socially constructed; members carry an image in their mind of what they imagine their community to be like. They act in accordance with this image in order to belong.

The creation of this privileged interior is also necessarily an act of exclusion of something; the interior cannot exist except in reference to an object exterior. Following Gramsci, this object exterior is the subaltern or the Other, the populations of people that are socially and often geographically separate from hegemonic power. The subaltern can be understood as the necessary remainders of the divisive creation of a particular society, the parts that don't fit in the hegemony. It is also the remainder that proves that hegemony's claims of inclusivity and representativeness are necessarily false. Though hegemonic powers may seek to create a sense that they can speak for everyone, that the interior space of the hegemony constitutes the entire nation, the existence of the subaltern problematizes these claims. It makes evident that there is something that does not fit. It questions the hegemony and the adherence to the nomos structure, challenging borders and national boundaries.

In *Posthegemony*, Jon Beasley-Murray speaks to the reactions generated by the challenging of hegemonic borders. Insecurity about the integrity of the nation-state creates an increased insistence on delineations and boundaries. Beasley-Murray asserts that “the more that

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<sup>1</sup> Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*

<sup>2</sup> *Imagined Communities*

hegemony expands, the more its perimeter is violently and viciously patrolled by state forces” (xiv). As the hegemony begins to be questioned, the privileged position of those inside its bounds appears increasingly precarious. This precarity drives a renewed vigilance in policing the borders. Today, when using the phrases “policing the border” and “state forces” in the same breath it is impossible to ignore our current political climate. We see in President Trump’s rhetoric a perfect example of this violent and vicious patrol of the border based on a fear of transnational expansion and of losing one’s place. This fear is expressed through racist and white supremacist rhetoric and actions that seek to defend an imagined community and hegemony that some may feel is changing. As the border between Mexico and the United States becomes blurred, arbitrary delineations are seized upon to shore up the fading nation-state. We see a rise in nationalist sentiment and an increased adherence to ethnic norms, with many Latino citizens who were born in the United States being called derogatory names and told to ‘go back where they came from.’ The testimonial subjects and migrant actors whose stories I will be analyzing are the subaltern remainders of both the United States and Latin American societies, the people the American political system has failed to represent and incorporate.

Beasley-Murray defines posthegemony as “the places in which hegemony ceases to make sense” (xiv). This neat definition helps explain the power of the testimonial accounts I analyze; they demonstrate the fault lines of the hegemonic system. These Latin American voices are the agents of the subaltern post-hegemonic, and the sites they inhabit are the places where the hegemony stops making sense. The labor of the 1,200 migrants that work on farms here in Vermont is an essential part of the local economy; the dairy industry would collapse without them.<sup>3</sup> The imaginary of the pastoral, idyllic Vermont countryside with its herds of cows and

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<sup>3</sup> The dairy industry represents a critical part of the Vermont economy: it brings in \$2.2 billion in revenue every year and is one of Vermont’s top private employers (Vermont Dairy Promotion Council).

green meadows, most certainly does not include the presence of migrant Latin American farmworkers, but could not possibly be sustained without them. The hegemony has ceased to make logical sense. I situate my discussion of subaltern voices in this contemporary national and local political context to highlight the importance of discussing and thinking critically about how the Other speaks; I trace the transformations it must go through to be able to speak and the consequences this speech carries.

In both the testimonial narratives and the comics that I study a subaltern subject delivers their story orally. They narrate their particular life experiences with the goal of advocating for their community. I use Hayden White's theories from *Tropics of Discourse* to analyze this narration and highlight the slippages of discourse. Testimonial subjects engage in speaking in tropes, or figurative language, as all writers and creators of discourse do. Once delivered, their account is transcribed and made text by an interlocutor. Miguel Barnet terms this interlocutor a *gestor* (in English, a "witness" or "mediator").<sup>4</sup> The *gestor* frames the subject's testimony in terms intelligible to the Western reader in order to gain access to the hegemon. In the act of this reframing, the transcription, shuffling, and often translation of the testifier's story, the *gestor* colors the testimony through their own experience and perspective. Both the testifier and the *gestor*, then, engage in troping. They trope to make the unfamiliar, the subaltern, intelligible to the Western reader. As White explains,

understanding is a process of rendering the unfamiliar .... familiar; of removing it from the domain of things felt to be 'exotic' and unclassified into one or another domain of experience encoded adequately enough to be felt to be humanly useful, nonthreatening, or simply known by association. This process of understanding can only be tropological in nature. (5)

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<sup>4</sup> "La novela testimonio: Alquimia de la memoria"



Discourse necessarily engages in the use of figurative language in the attempt to describe reality. It does so in order to render the unfamiliar familiar, but due to this practice can never be truly transparent.

If the assertion that what we read on the page can never be an exact, transparent transcription of reality seems to render studying the rhetoric devices used by different kinds of literature fruitless, White offers the suggestion that troping does not always take us away from reality. He states that “troping is both a movement *from* one notion of the way things are related *to* another notion, and a connection between things so that they can be expressed in a language that takes account of the possibility of their being expressed otherwise” (2). Seen in this way, the swerves in language use that accompany the discursive effort do not abstract the truth. It is simply necessary to recognize that every linguistic formulation is a particular way to encode reality, and that there are a variety of other ways that the same concept could have been expressed. This de-totalization of the text and meaning creates possibilities for a more democratic reading and for a multiplicity of interpretations of the same work.

Each of the texts I analyze attempt to handle the gap between reality and discourse, to present a truth text. Following White, this endeavor will never be entirely successful. However, the ways in which they attempt to create this sensation of something real, to bring the reader into contact with the true experience of the subaltern subject, are important to recognize. Many scholars have produced critical work regarding this quest for authenticity in the genre of testimonial literature, analyzing the rhetorical devices used by both testimonial subjects and *gestors* to convey subaltern stories. I explore this body of scholarly work and then apply it to the genre of nonfiction, first-person comics. I suggest the genre designation “testimonial comics” in order to draw the connection between these new works and testimonial literature due to their

origin in oral testimony, the presence of *gestor* or amanuensis, and the necessary translation or representation that the testimony must go through in order to become present on the page. In these comics it's important to recognize that intended visibility varies between testimonial literature and comics. Rigoberta Menchú famously sought to publicize her voice and attach her name to her testimony, while the migrants involved in these comics need to be anonymous for their own protection.

Through an in-depth analysis of comics panels based on the life history of both Mexican and Guatemalan migrants, I explore how these largely unseen, unheard migrants are given a voice through the text of the comics and how the comics serve to narrate the act of crossing the border and the trauma inherent in migration. The structure of comics, which combines words and images as well as “gutters,” or blank framing spaces, creates powerful new ways to discuss memory, history, and the act of migration. I suggest that, like testimonial literature, these comics serve to bring marginalized voices into contact with the Western hegemon and advocate for the abject, the Other, the subaltern.

## Chapter I: Testimonial

### I. Genre definition

Before beginning my discussion of how comics fit into the larger structure of testimonial literature, it is necessary to define the parameters of the testimonial genre and its history in Latin America. Testimonial works, or *testimonios*, are texts that speak in the first-person “I” and deliver the story of a protagonist traditionally located at the margins of society. The protagonist delivers their story verbally to an amanuensis, who organizes this testimony into cohesive chapters or sections. This amanuensis, what Barnet calls the *gestor*, is considered an author, if not the author, of the resulting narrative. The presence of the amanuensis is generally necessary because the testifier, the subject of the narrative, is most often either entirely illiterate or lacking in the education or experience necessary to write a professional work.

In his highly influential text “The Margin at the Center” (in *Against Literature*), John Beverley defines the testimonial as “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, graphemic as opposed to acoustic form), told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts” (71). He roots the origins of testimonial in the decades-old tradition of Latin American nonfiction personal narratives such as Díaz del Castillo’s *Verdadera historia* or Cabeza de Vaca’s *Naufragios* in addition to the popularity of participant accounts of guerrilla or revolutionary activity, such as Che Guevara’s *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War*. *Testimonios* also bear resemblance to the genre of the *bildungsroman* or coming of age novel, as well as the picaresque novel that features an erstwhile protagonist’s telling of his or her own life. Beverley furthers his definition by asserting that a *testimonio* is “a story that *needs* to be told – involving a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, exploitation, or simply survival that is implicated in the act of narration itself” (73).

Testimonial narratives are often politically charged, as the protagonist recounts their experience or witnessing of human rights violations, state-sponsored violence, or revolutionary movements.

Testimonial subjects, as Beverley mentions, are traditionally located in a position of subalternity. Following Anderson's concept of the imagined community, if we conceive of the nation-state as an imagined community in which subjects must comply with the tenets of a specific national imaginary in order to belong, then the subaltern is that which does not comply, and as a result does not gain complete acceptance to or entrance into the hegemonic order of the dominant imagined community. In Latin America, indigenous groups and those of non-European descent as well as non-heteronormative subjects most often occupy this subaltern space. Their voices are not present in the interior space of the hegemony, they are elided or erased from the formation of the national imaginary and the *nomos*. The conceptual framework for subaltern subject's relationship with discourse comes from Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay "Can The Subaltern Speak?". There Spivak argues that in order to be understood or to garner attention the subaltern subject must frame their discourse in terms comprehensible to the Western hegemon. The act of speaking is framed by the *nomos* structure. The questions and conclusions that stem from Spivak's assertion are manifold and will be discussed further in following sections, but her core concept speaks to a defining characteristic of testimonial, namely the differential power between the speaker and the writer. Those who deliver the testimony are traditionally subaltern subjects, while those that record and write it are intellectuals or authors included in the privileged hegemon. This relationship is necessary because the amanuensis, with their access to dominant culture, functions as an intermediary for the subaltern's story through both translation and negotiation between the abject and the dominant *nomos*.

## II. The process of creating a testimonial

The first work widely recognized as a testimonial narrative was Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave (Biografía de un cimarrón)*, the first version of which was published in 1966. Barnet was born in Cuba but was educated for most of his life in the United States, and returned to Cuba to study anthropology and sociology at the University of Havana. The testimonial subject is Cuban Esteban Montejo, a former runaway slave of African descent. The first English version of *Biography of a Runaway Slave* in the United States was published in 1968. Perhaps the best and most widely known testimonial narrative, *I, Rigoberta Menchú (Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia)*, followed roughly fifteen years later in 1983. This *testimonio* was transcribed by Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, a Venezuelan anthropologist who was involved in various leftist movements throughout Latin America and who eventually moved to France with her husband, Régis Debray. Rigoberta Menchú was born to a poor indigenous Guatemalan family, was raised in the Quiché-Mayan culture, and eventually became an organizer of resistance to the oppression in Guatemala after the tragic death of her family. She met Burgos-Debray in Paris to share her story. My analysis will focus on these two foundational testimonial texts and the controversy, discussion, and analysis they have fomented.

Miguel Barnet first heard of Esteban Montejo after being contacted by a nursing home, who offered two potential subjects for interview; one was the 105-year-old Montejo and the other was a younger woman. Barnet was immediately drawn to Montejo because of his particular perspective on culture, religion, and history, and for his extraordinary life experience. Montejo had lived through colonial slavery, escape, the independence of Cuba, and the Cuban revolution. He began interviewing Montejo in 1963. Barnet asserts that his motivations for writing the *testimonio* stemmed from a sense that the Cuban revolutionary movement needed to be recorded,

that they were witnessing a shift in historical time. He states in a later article, “I wrote *Biografía de un cimarrón* ... because there was a need to record the history of our country. A successful revolution had taken place that had changed many values, and it was necessary to record history from a new perspective” (“The Untouchable Cimarrón” 282). This explanation situates the testimonial as a way to capture this important transition in Cuban history.

However, *Biografía de un cimarrón* translator Nick Hill, as well as literary critic Abraham Acosta suggest that Barnet’s motivations may not have been so pure. In his preface to the narrative, Hill explains that the work provided the revolution with a narrative that justified its claims and demands, a perspective that spoke against the privileged classes. As, Acosta’s definition of a testimonio as a “nationalist project consolidating a revolutionary state” (132) makes even more evident, the motivations behind transcribing and producing a testimonial work are often political. Montejo’s recollection and explanation of Cuba’s repressive history helped build a timeline which revolutionary leaders could use to shore up Castro’s claim (in a speech in 1968) that in Cuba there had only ever been one revolution, that the movement he spearheaded was the culmination of a century of repression. Hill uses Barnet’s exclusion of Montejo’s perspective of the Revolution as well as his strategic choices in editing his testimony to argue that Barnet, an intellectual necessarily mistrusted by an authoritarian regime, saw in the work a chance to curry favor with the revolutionary leaders. He argues that Barnet,

saw in Montejo an opportunity to construct an image of the *cimarrón* that government officials would support and, equally important, one that would provide him with a path to his reintegration into revolutionary society. When editing the transcriptions, therefore, Barnet added his own voice and I daresay, political agenda to Montejo’s. (Translator’s Note)

It is evident that the first widely recognized *testimonio*, the very spark of the whole literary movement, was loaded with political overtones and textual manipulation (conscious or

otherwise) by its author. I would argue that while no text, regardless of its genre, can ever be utterly objective and free from agenda or ideology, the point that Hill and Acosta make clear is that the limitation of ideology exists in the world of *testimonio* just as any other.

Barnet, both in his conclusion to the narrative and in later articles, states that his core aim in writing *testimonio*, beyond documenting history, was giving unheard voices a platform. In the conclusion of *Biografía de un cimarrón* he asserts that, “The only desire I have is to reveal the human heart, the heart of the men that traditional historiography has marked with the sign of a proverbial fatalism by writing them off as a ‘people without a history.’ These “people without a history,” in the language I have already set out, can be defined as the subaltern, the abject. Their perspective is rarely recorded in historical accounts authored by the hegemon. In “The Untouchable Cimarrón,” Barnet also points out that this narrative is the “first time in Cuba that a person who lived through historical events as important as slavery, the life of a Maroon, the War of Independence, tells his story from his own angle” (283). Though the way this story is recorded and reaches the reader may be problematic and filled with slippages in meaning or intention, this is what draws people to *testimonio*, what makes it such a compelling genre to study.<sup>5</sup> *Testimonio* has, as Acosta terms it, an “unguarded possibility of the real” (*Illiteracy* 160). It brings us in to an unseen world and tells us stories from people who have experienced real pain and suffering, real political and social change, from their own point of view. The ways this point of view is transcribed, translated, and assembled, are equally fascinating, for they point to the ways these unvarnished stories must speak in terms familiar to the Western hegemon in order to be heard.

Stories delivered orally feature drastically different narrative progressions and structures

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<sup>5</sup> This “slippage” is also something that unseats the claims that some (Beverly et al) seek to make in suggesting that the *testimonio* presents a way to present reality more transparently and authentically.

than stories told through text. In the case of both *Biography of a Runaway Slave* and *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the amanuensis interviewed the testimonial subject and recorded their answers. These interviews at times were free-flowing, with the subject discussing what they wished and the amanuensis largely present to listen, and at others featured more pointed questions and intentional changes of direction.<sup>6</sup> These recordings were then transcribed and re-ordered. In her introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Burgos explains that due to the sheer volume of transcriptions to wade through, she decided to code Menchú's accounts by topic and assembled the narrative through combining pieces with similar themes (xx). In constructing the book in this way, Burgos is, of course, filtering Menchú's account through her own understanding of how a story should flow, through her own perception of the world. Claudia Ferman explains that "undoubtedly it is Burgos who, by defoliating, ordering, and harmonizing the rhetorical expression of the spoken word, inscribes and incorporates a story and a world vision within the tradition of the book" ("Textual Truth, Historical Truth, and Media Truth: Everybody Speaks About the Menchús," in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, 166). In order to gain access to Western discourse the *gestors* of both Menchú and Montejo have taken their testimonios out of the original, oral context and organized their words according to the logic of the hegemonic narrative structure; we begin with childhood or adolescence and from there follow a loosely chronological track.

In the process of polishing the transcribed testimonials for publishing, both Barnet and Burgos explain that they changed certain elements of grammar or diction to make the piece more readable. Burgos asserts that she made these changes in order to avoid the sense of Menchú, who had only recently learned Spanish, as a "picturesque" figure. Burgos wanted Menchú's story to

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<sup>6</sup> Burgos (Introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*) and Hill (Translator's Note)



be taken seriously and for the focus to be on what Menchú said, not how she said it. Burgos' recognition of the way grammatical errors would have muted the power of this story speaks to the essential tension of the testimonial genre, which seeks to capture in words intelligible to a Western audience the particular experiences of people utterly foreign to them. Barnet also speaks to this tension in his conclusion, stating,

I think our peoples still have much to tell in their own tongue, not one invented for them to undermine them. The ability of the *gestor* of the testimonial novel is to balance telling stories in that tongue and not adulterate its idiosyncratic essence is testimonial's necessary mechanism. (Conclusion, loc 3078)

In other words, testimonials need to foreground the "idiosyncratic essence" of the foreign Other in a language not their own. The conundrum of how to accomplish such a project leaves much up to the discretion of the authors, transcribers, and translators, who reveal their own understandings of how a story should be told with every grammatical and structural choice they make.

In *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, translator Nick Hill attempts to reconcile Montejo's verbatim speech with the demands of a literary work by including many words that remain in their original form, untranslated. These words are typically specific nouns and are defined in a glossary located after the conclusion to the narrative. Hill explains, "my challenge or burden as translator has been to provide or suggest the sounds that come most directly from Montejo himself, the "aroma" of the original, as Claribel Alegría has put it" (Translator's Note, loc 74). These words are not explicitly defined in the text, which relies heavily on context clues. The device of including untranslated words may serve to acknowledge the original cadence and texture of Montejo's testimony, but it also asks the reader to become more involved in the act of deciphering language. Without clear definitions, the English reader must either garner enough information from the surrounding text to create meaning or pause to research each unfamiliar word before continuing. This necessary interaction between Spanish and English may serve to

foreground the act of translation inherent in this work, to bolster “an awareness of the process of giving voice to Esteban Montejo without making it an invented or ‘folkloric’ voice” (Hill loc 56). I find this translation device very clever, because instead of attempting to seamlessly translate the account Hill has chosen to highlight the gaps between languages. Hill’s account also highlights the fact that the presence of a translator adds yet another layer between the reader and the testimonial.

The translation of the very titles of these two testimonials demonstrate the complexities inherent in the genre. The Spanish title of Menchú’s testimonial is *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*. Literally translated, this title becomes “My name is Rigoberta Menchú and in this way my conscience was awakened.” Admittedly, it’s a mouthful. However, the decision to simplify the English title is significant because of the way it points to the inability of translation to precisely transfer meaning. The Spanish phrase *me llamo* has two possible English translations: “my name is” or “I call myself.” The structure of Spanish indirect object pronouns creates a Spanish title that is action-based, while the English translation strips the pronouns and renders the action passive. This title is a good example of the slippages of language that exist even in apparently simple phrases and of the way language powerfully shapes how concepts can be voiced. The translators have chosen to bypass the slippages of language by using an entirely different title, gesturing to the fact that the act of translating this originally Spanish text into English has, in some ways, created an entirely new text.

Titles also serve to signal perspective. In his preface to *Biography of a Runaway Slave* Nick Hill traces the evolution of the work’s title in subsequent versions since its first publication. The work was originally published in Spanish as *Biografía de un cimarrón*. In the first English translation of the book in 1968, it was titled *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*. The current

title, one may note, now declared the work to be a biography. However, the text speaks from the first person point of view. These changes to the title clearly grapple with the testimonial genre and who it is that truly authors the book. Hill explains that Barnet takes on the first-person perspective while writing another man's story as an attempted "antidote to merely 'fictionalizing' a man's life" (Translator's Note), with the hope that speaking from his perspective will grant Montejo some agency in his own story and avoid "othering" him. He criticizes the former designation as "autobiography" and argues that the current title, though clearly at odds with the first-person narration, seeks to highlight the complicated production of the text. He states that the earlier title,

failed to recognize the complex process of reproducing the text. The current translation goes back to the original title of *Biography*, with the understanding that the title, like the text itself, needs to be analyzed in the act of reading. "Biography" invites the reader to become involved in the process of hearing and deciphering the multiple voices in the story: the *cimarrón* Esteban, the writer Miguel Barnet, and now an invisible translator. (loc 56)

Hill's argument emphasizes the polyvocality that underlies all speech in testimonial works and the blurring of the lines between author and subject.

Hill goes on to suggest that *Biography of a Runaway Slave* serves as both biography and autobiography for Barnet. In preparing to interview Montejo, Barnet created a list of questions intended to prompt him to talk about subjects of particular interest to Barnet or to Cuban ethnography in general. These questions frame Montejo's narrative. As discussed earlier, Barnet further involves his own perspective as he structures Montejo's previously nonlinear testimony. In his essay "La novela-testimonio: Socio-literatura" Barnet discusses the conflation of self and subject necessary to writing a testimonial.

Without meaning to I was searching for an identity, for a sincere confession. In the relationship between author and protagonist or researcher-informant one has to look for an unfolding, become the other by prying apart one's self...one must try to live one's life in order to live another life, that of one's character. (285).

This *doblamiento*, or doubling, is also discussed in Burgos' introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Burgos states that she had to act in some ways as Menchú, to attempt to live her in life, in order to write her story. She states that while she was writing Rigoberta's story, she had to commit wholeheartedly to the endeavor; "For the whole of that week, I lived in Rigoberta's world" (xv). This doubling means that in writing the testimonial subject's story the amanuensis is also, in some way, writing their own story. Their presence, their perspective, is inalienable from their writing and is present on every page. In allowing a testimonial subject to speak through them, they, themselves, are necessarily also speaking. Burgos-Debray reminds us that testimonial authors are not simply static transcribers or organizers but human actors who personally color the stories they tell us; she asserts that "[Rigoberta] allowed me to discover another self" (xix). In reading testimonials, then, we are reading two stories at one time: that of the testimonial subject and the testimonial author.

This necessary filtering of the subaltern voice, the iterations it must go through in order to access dominant discourse, references Spivak's essential question, "can the subaltern speak?" If it can speak at all, it must do so through a filter of power and privilege, be that a Westernized amanuensis or a hegemonic language. Menchú delivers her account in Spanish, a language she learned only two years prior. Through learning Spanish, she can attempt to access this world of Western discourse in order to speak and be heard by people beyond the Quiché-Mayan community. However, the structure of Spanish acts as a limitation on what she can explain. Language is an intimate part of and indeed the basis of any hegemony or ideological structure. In this case, Spanish is part of the colonial ideology that "covered over" indigenous people and

cultures.<sup>7</sup> For example, The Spanish pronoun system does not allow for the existence of the indigenous collective sense of ownership and belonging that Menchú is attempting to describe. To borrow a concept from Audre Lorde, Menchú's necessary use of the master's tools, the Spanish language and its conventions, will never dismantle the master's house.<sup>8</sup> Restrained by the use of Spanish, she cannot express the indigenous beliefs fully and complexly. She is confined in her ability to challenge hegemonic understandings of the world. Sommer defines Spanish as "the language that the enemy uses to conquer differences. For an Indian, to learn Spanish can amount to passing over to the other side," (35). Here signaling another important result of Rigoberta's use of Spanish, she has had to step outside of her community in order to be recognized in the dominant world system. She has learned Spanish, has consciously chosen to use the tools of the master.

She has made the transition to Spanish in order to better equip herself to advocate for her community, to bridge cultural divides and spread awareness, but she has had to give up something crucial in order to do so. Tragically, her defense of her community also necessarily involves her increasing cultural alienation from it. For someone who has grown up taught to remain unyieldingly loyal to the indigenous way of life, it must have been incredibly painful to sacrifice this cultural integrity in the interest of that selfsame community. Sommer references a Quiché emphasis on preparing bread the traditional way, not the Spanish way, and asserts that "from this we can sense how perfectly possible it is, and (personally) tragic for Rigoberta, to stop being an "Indian," because her political work depends on mixing and transgressing categories, on violating the ethnic boundaries that safeguard secrets" (35). These boundaries have been

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<sup>7</sup> Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*

<sup>8</sup> "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," p. 2

intentionally set up by her indigenous community to protect themselves, so there is heavy irony in Menchú's choice to advocate for her community by intentionally breaking them.

Menchú must straddle a careful line between the indigenous and the Western. She seeks to tell the unvarnished story of the oppression of her people, but she must do so in a way that is both intelligible and, critically, attention-grabbing, to a Western audience. Arias explains this tension in his article "Authoring Ethnicized Subjects: Rigoberta Menchú and the Performative Production of the Subaltern Self" stating,

She had to embrace elements of Western discourse to make herself heard by her target audience, but she also had to guarantee the preservation and continuation of her Mayan identity, which was the validating element of her discourse. This is why she performs her identity as she does, mediating Mayan 'secrets' and Western parameters of understanding (79-80).

Arias' analysis includes two key concepts: that her subaltern identity is the "validating element" of her discourse and that she protects this identity by keeping secrets. Through Burgos-Debray's introduction we learn that Menchú arrived at her home in Paris, ready to tell her story, wearing "traditional costume, including a multicoloured *huipil* with rich and varied embroidery" (xiv). Though it was snowing that night, Menchú's arms were bare. Why choose to dress in such a way while traveling Paris on a snowy night? Linda Marie Brooks argues in "Testimonio's Poetics of Performance" that the *huipil*, when worn outside of its traditional indigenous context, becomes a kind of political costuming. She argues that Menchú performs the character of the subaltern in an entirely conscious kind of self-fashioning that attracts the attention of a Western audience. Brooks asserts that the wearing of the *huipil* was "clear costuming," and that by "donning the *huipil* on that snowy night Menchú is no longer 'merely herself,'" but becomes "the character of an indigenous Guatemalan struggling to publicize her cause" (194). Seen in this way, Menchú is very intentionally performing the character of the Other. She plays with the Manichean dualism

between the indigenous/Other and the Western, costuming herself as the prototypical indigenous women while delivering her story in Spanish with the aim of sharing it with the Western hegemon. It's a careful balancing act.

Menchú's Quiché-Mayan identity is what "validates" her testimony for Burgos and the Western public at large. She is careful to preserve the liminal position between cultures not only through her dress but also through the way she delivers her story. There are several instances in her testimonial when Menchú steps out of the flow of narration and asserts that there are certain secrets she cannot explain in the book. The work closes with a mysterious assertion; "I'm still keeping secret what I think no one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets" (247). Her outright refusal to speak about certain topics, her assertion that there are some things we will never know or understand, can feel very jarring to the reader. We are accustomed to the full divulgence of the autobiographical "I," to autobiographical authors who grant the reader full access to their world. Menchú signals her difference through the choice to not only keep these secrets but to outright tell us that she's keeping them. Sommer argues that this rhetorical device works to pique the reader's interest, stating

the refusal is performative; it constructs metaleptically the apparent cause of the refusal: our craving to know. Before she denies us the satisfaction of learning her secrets, we may not be aware of any desire to grasp them. (34)

With costuming and keeping secrets, these dual performances of the Other, Menchú is carefully both protecting and emphasizing the authority that comes with her subaltern position.

### III. The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy

Anthropologist David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* was published in 1999. The book, which generated immediate international attention, is based on Stoll's extensive anthropological experience in Guatemala and seeks to highlight inaccuracies in Menchú's testimony. The publication of this work comes seven years after Menchú was recognized with the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. Stoll, in the introduction to his work, terms her "an unlikely peace laureate" (viii) and presents the question: "If part of the laureate's famous story is not true, does it matter?" Stoll asserts that her story merits close attention as the international community now seeks to support justice in Guatemala. He acknowledges that reading her testimonial with a skeptical view may be an unpopular decision, but he believes that it is a worthy endeavor. His fact-checking reveals that there are several discrepancies in her story, the most glaring of which include the fact that her brother Patrocinio was not burned alive but was shot, that she speaks of the death of another brother from pesticide poisoning though that brother never existed, and that she claims never having attended school but actually spent three years in boarding school. He also argues that she misrepresents how violence arrived in her village of Uspantán and includes inaccuracies regarding challenges faced by the community before violence reached them.

In the end, Stoll's chief complaint is not that there are factual inaccuracies but that Menchú is a biased storyteller. He argues that due to her involvement with the Guatemalan Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), her testimonial is intended to bias readers towards empathy for the indigenous and support for radical leftists. In an interview with Dina Fernández García, he states that Menchú's chief sin is that "she believed in the ideology [of the EGP] and used it to frame the experience of her family and people" (*The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, 67). He even



cedes that the episodes she describes likely did happen, just to someone else in the community. He admits, “the accuracy of Rigoberta’s testimonial might not be significant to many Guatemalans because it is obviously the truth, in a national sense if not a personal one” (69). However, the problem he identifies with Menchú’s supposed bias is that it encourages ‘romantic’ notions of indigenous relationships with guerrilla forces. In his book, he states that “the underlying problem is not how Rigoberta told her story, but how well-intentioned foreigners have chosen to interpret it” (xiv). He argues that by becoming so enamored by Menchú’s story, Western readers ignore other indigenous perspectives who were not sympathetic towards the guerillas. He takes issue with the mythologizing of Menchú as a figure, terming the testimonial a “mythic inflation” (232), and argues that she is a less than reliable narrator.

Stoll’s deepest criticism of the book lies not in the factual inaccuracies in Guatemala, but in how the book was received and then reacted upon in the international community. He believes that Menchú misrepresents the indigenous reality by suggesting that the Guatemalan armed struggle was a direct result and response to the repression faced by indigenous community. In Stoll’s view, the left’s attempt to wage an armed struggle actually did not come from the indigenous groups and left these communities squarely in the crossfire, stranded between the radical armed leftists and the repressive government. The indigenous eventually aligned themselves with the left due to the brutal force of the government’s counter-insurgency measures. He argues that Menchú’s version of events is a romanticized notion of indigenous rebellion that tells “academics what they want to hear. . . We think we are getting closer to understanding Guatemalan peasants when actually we are being borne away by the mystifications wrapped up in an iconic figure” (227). In order to counter Menchú’s claims and challenge how her testimonial is read in Western classrooms, he must impugn Menchú’s

integrity as an authoritative indigenous voice. To do so, he points out her ties to the Guatemalan guerrilla movement and paints her as a biased narrator.

Menchú has defended her testimonial by asserting that she was speaking in the communal, rather than the individual, voice (as she notes at the beginning of the work). In the first few sentences of her testimony, she asserts, “The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people” (1). She attempts to deliver the whole history of her community in order to advocate for them. If she had spoken only to her own personal experience, she would have drastically narrowed the scope of her testimony and limited the power of her narrative. In an interview with Juan Jesús Aznárez conducted just after the publication of Stoll’s text, she was prompted to discuss the criticisms against her that she represents others’ experiences as her own. She states, “I can’t force them to understand. Everything, for me, that was the story of my community is also my own story” (“Rigoberta Menchú: Those Who Attack Me Humiliate the Victims,” in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, 113). She states that she is deeply saddened by these attacks on her integrity, her memory and the history of her community, and that questioning her authority in this way only further hurts the victims of violence in Guatemala who have been silenced for so long.

Beverley suggests that the controversy surrounding Menchú goes farther than a dispute about empirical fact. In his essay “What Happens When the Subaltern Speaks: Rigoberta Menchú, Multiculturalism, and the Presumption of Equal Worth,” he asserts that “the argument between Menchú and Stoll is not so much about what really happened as it is about who has the authority to narrate” (221). By Stoll’s measure, Menchú is an unfit narrator due to her connections with EGP and her inclusion of narratives that are not her own. By traditional

autobiographical standards, she stretches the truth. Beverley argues that what sets Stoll and Menchú at odds is the way they measure truth; he cites Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's theories on 'presumption of equal worth' and explains that claims to truth are always contextual. The dispute between Menchú and Stoll is fundamentally about who has the right to evaluate truth, who speaks with authority. Beverley states,

Against the authority of testimonial 'voice,' Stoll wants to affirm the authority of the fact-gathering procedures of anthropology and journalism, in which testimonial accounts such as Menchú's will be treated simply as raw material that must be processed by more objective techniques of assessment. (228)

Effectively, Stoll's analysis attempts to unseat Menchú from the position of author. In his view, her story is one that is colored by her traumatic experiences and is not objective.

Here, it may be useful to return to Spivak's essential question of "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Menchú has attempted to speak and be heard through Burgos-Debray and her text has become widely popular. This interest is due in part, as previously mentioned, to the carefully curated image of Menchú as the Other, an unknown subaltern subject that can grant the reader an intimate view into worlds previously unknown. Following Spivak's logic that if the subaltern could speak in a way that garnered true critical attention, it would no longer be subaltern, then Menchú herself no longer occupies the subaltern position. Her work, and her own person, have become part of the hegemon due to their wide recognition. However, Stoll attempts to expulse her from this position. He challenges Menchú's access to and acceptance in the Western hegemon, arguing that her account has been taken too readily as truth and that she herself has been deified. Beverley notes that, "where Spivak is concerned with the way in which elite representation effaces the effective presence of the subaltern, Stoll's case against Menchú is precisely that: a way of, so to speak, *resubalternizing* a narrative that aspired to (and achieved) hegemony" (223). He attempts to push her back into the realm of the Other.

Stoll questions Menchú's ability to speak for an entire group by pointing to the heterogeneity of the Quiche-Mayan culture. He admits that she is an authentic Mayan voice, but lists other voices that could also be considered authorities:

Rigoberta is a legitimate Mayan voice. So are all the young Mayas who want to move to Los Angeles or Houston. So is the man with a large family who owns three worn-out acres and wants me to buy him a chain saw so he can cut down the last forest more quickly. Any of these people can be picked out to make misleading generalizations about Mayas. (247)

With this, it is possible to see Stoll's desire to construct a sense of a heterogeneous and fractured Mayan identity. In this schema, he as the observer, the outside Western anthropologist, is the only voice qualified to make sense of this seemingly contradictory community. He uses Menchú's selfsame defense, the fact that her community contains multiple perspectives that need to be given voice, in order to delegitimize her authorship. If there are multiple voices to be synthesized, he seems to be arguing that Menchú, as just another member of the community, does not have the authority to do so. Instead, he as the outside anthropologist is uniquely situated to comment on the veracity of Menchú's statements as biased in a way his own account surely could not be. I find his argument that Menchú's particular history renders her story misleading and generalizing ineffective. If one member of a community cannot be trusted to speak for the whole, how then can Stoll make claims about the overly romantic reactions of Western academics when he himself is one? The fact of the multiplicity of indigenous voices is not enough to unseat Menchú's authorial integrity.

The attempted de-authorization of Menchú is not confined to her critics but extends to her defenders as well. Claudia Ferman, in her essay "Textual Truth, Historical Truth, and Media Truth: Everybody Speaks about the Menchús" attempts to defend Menchú's account through removing her as the creator of the text. She cites a 1999 meeting with Burgos-Debray in Paris when she was granted the opportunity to look over the mountain of transcripts, notes,

manuscripts and classification cards that went into the production of the text. She states that it is at that moment that she realized that the testimonial was an essentially literary document, a “written artifact” (166). She acknowledges Burgos-Debray’s critical role as transcriber and compiler in the creation of this document, and argues that authorship of this text cannot belong only to Menchú.

Menchú’s activism has been reinscribed as a form of ‘authorism,’ where text, myth, personage and individual blur together. Thus, Menchú, now the author of the political myth, is assumed to be the ‘author’ of (authorizes) the textuality that surfaced in those few days in Paris. But that text also has us, the multiple interpretative communities, as its authors. (167)

Ferman’s essay acknowledges both the mythologization of Menchú as a political figure and the critical role that readers play in constructing meaning in a work. In this way, she repeats key concepts of many of the same arguments put forward by Stoll, but attempts to use them to defend the testimonial.

Ferman also questions Menchú’s speech itself, pointing to Burgos-Debray as the person who “harmonized” and “inscribed” the raw and error-filled language in which Menchú delivered her testimony (166). In this way, Menchú is stripped of both her position as author of this text and as the speaker within it, as well as her subjectivity and agency. Acosta analyzes this attempted defense in *Thresholds of Illiteracy*, stating that,

the impulse was to de-authorize [Menchú], to displace her amid the materiality of the text’s production, to disembodify her from the empirical realm of analysis by containing her within the eloquence of Burgos’s literary expression and disseminating her authorship among the various ‘interpretive communities’ that constitute her...for Ferman the best defense of Menchú is to erase her voice from testimonio’s literalness and reinscribe her in its literariness. (128)

Highlighting the testimonial’s literariness means recognizing that it is a written, produced document, a text that necessarily constitutes and filters reality. Taking White’s concept of the machinations of discourse from his text *Tropics of Discourse*, we know that all literary texts

engage in troping, or figurative language, in order to present their subject matter. In the process, reality is configured and re-presented. By acknowledging these slippages of language, Ferman attempts to defend the inaccuracies of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. However, what she ends up confirming is that the impact of the work depends on how the reader interacts with it; if both critics (Stoll) and defenders (Ferman) alike can use the same theories to argue opposing viewpoints, then the text is just as much about *how* it is read as what is read in it.

#### IV. Rigoberta's Secrets

One way that Menchú asserts her agency is through the keeping of secrets. As detailed earlier, she states in the book that there are certain secrets that she is unwilling or even unable to share with us, pieces of the Quiché-Mayan culture that outsiders can never discover. This refusal to provide the intimacy often assumed between author and reader seems abrupt and surprising as it jolts the reader out of the narrative flow and reminds them that what they are reading is a construction, that it is only the information Menchú has explicitly chosen to deliver. Sommer argues that this refusal can be read as a deliberate, repeatable textual strategy which “produces a kind of distance akin to respect” (36). Menchú is asserting her own hold over her story. The gesture is “self-conscious and repeatable...not silence but a rather flamboyant refusal of information” (36). Menchú intentionally signals her difference. By doing so, she reminds us that she as narrator has agency, that we as readers do not have the right that we so often assume we do to know everything.

Her refusal to divulge not only demonstrates but points out the slippages of language and meaning by arguing that there are some things that, even were she to tell us about them, we couldn't possibly understand. Some secrets cannot be transferred from the indigenous framework

of understanding to the Western one. As Sommer explains, “it is the degree of our foreignness, our cultural difference that would make her secrets incomprehensible to the outsider. We could never know them as she does, because we would inevitably force her secrets into our framework” (34). Reading her secret-keeping in this way shows that Menchú is aware, in some way, of the perils of subaltern speech. The secrets of her community would have to pass through a Western interlocutor and be read by a Western audience, a process that Sommer believes would necessarily distort their meaning and power. We cannot understand them, so Menchú does not attempt to tell us.

Acosta goes one step further; he suggests that Menchú herself is not in possession of these secrets. He points to the ellipsis in Chapter 2 of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, when is describing birth rituals Menchú states, “The parents then make a commitment. That they need to teach the child...--referring most often to our ancestors—that the child learn to keep all of our secrets” (48). He argues that because this text is a transcription of Menchú’s oral testimony, the ellipsis represents a pause where Menchú was at a loss for words. It bridges between what the parents “need to teach” and jumps abruptly to that the child learn to “keep all of our secrets,” without specifically revealing what it is the parents need to teach their children. Acosta argues that what the parents need to teach, then, is not the actual secrets of the community but the *practice* of keeping those secrets. He questions, “might [the ellipsis] signal the possibility that, contrary to our assumptions about orality, secrecy, and indigeneity, the truth signaled by the ellipsis is ultimately inaccessible even to Menchú herself?” (161). Menchú may not know what the secrets she is so vehemently defending are, just that they exist. Menchú explains in several instances throughout the testimonial that she regrets not having learning more from her mother before she died. Acosta states decisively, “Ultimately, the secrets Menchú keeps are secrets even to herself”

(162). She may not have learned the secrets themselves, but she has learned, as she suggests that all children do, that she must keep them.

Menchú's testimonial has garnered such international attention because of the sense it creates of coming in contact with something real, with the raw account of the Other, with stories traditionally unheard. According to Beverley, testimonio attracts attention because it produces "a sensation of experiencing reality." However, if Menchú herself, the carefully costumed subaltern figure, is not in possession of the secrets we so desperately seek in testimonial literature, then where can we find them? Who can tell us the truth? Acosta addresses this desperate search for the Real, concluding that

the drive for meaning will always exceed itself, and, as in the case of Rigoberta Menchú, the attempts to extract restitutive meaning from her secrets—through oral, literal, and literary interpretive practices—simply confirms the vacuous core underwriting all claims to cultural authenticity, disciplinary knowledge, and narrative form. (163)

In this view, no one can truly lay claim to authenticity and authority. Acosta's conclusion here seems to reference White's theory of discourse and its slippages, recognizing that literature cannot arrive at any single, authentic conclusion but must shuttle between different possible representations of the same reality. White reminds us that "it is not a matter of choosing between objectivity and distortion, but rather between different strategies for constituting 'reality' in thought so as to deal with it in different ways" (22). Menchú's account is but one strategy for representing reality.

The ellipsis in her testimony, the gaps, breaks and secrets, do not seek to hide the fact that this text is a representation. Instead, they highlight it. I argue that this this testimonial's ellipsis, this gap, this illiteracy, makes Menchú's story truer, more real, closer to whatever reality we're reaching for. If, as White suggests, discourse is "both interpretive and pre-interpretive," "always as much *about* the nature of interpretation itself as it is *about* the subject matter which is the



manifest occasion of its own elaboration” (4), then Menchú’s testimony is discourse that evinces its own interpretive nature. Menchú has parts of her life which are unknowable even to her, illiterate secrets that cannot be brought into discourse. The inclusion of the ellipsis in the telling of her story, intentionally or not, brings this unknowability to the forefront. It highlights for us that what we are reading is interpreted through Menchú’s eyes, through her telling, through what she doesn’t know. The strength of her testimony comes from these conspicuous gaps, her acknowledgement, conscious or not, that she cannot hope to authentically divulge the entire history and legacy of her people. She acknowledges that there are some things she cannot tell us, that she includes a multiplicity of voices in the hopes of troping *towards* a cohesive account of the community. The power of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, then, comes from its particular strategy for constituting reality, the way it highlights its seams, its secrets, and its polyvocality.

The fact that there is not a transparent relationship between signifier and signified means that there is no singular truth to be found in testimonial, or in discourse in general. This relationship allows for a plurality of possibilities, authors, and voices. The slippages inherent in discourse, the unknowability of the subaltern “secrets,” create the drive to find meaning detailed by Acosta. This drive to know secrets is something we as readers share with Menchú and with all consumers of literature and discourse. We all look to the text in the pursuit (endless as it may be) of knowledge that feels authentic, that brings with it Beverley’s “sensation” of truth. This shared drive creates a community that is both enamored by and wary of the concept of transparency, that seeks to find restitutive meaning even while aware that this meaning can only be presented through language and its slippages. The desire to know involves both readers and authors in the search for new ways to re-present and read reality.

## Chapter II: Defining Testimonial Comics

### I. History of the Comics Genre

The words “comics” refers primarily to the medium rather than the product; namely, the use of sequential panels to present a storyline. Though comics do not necessarily include words to accompany these picture panels, they most often do. Comics can vary in length from the single comic strip that we are all familiar with in our Sunday newspaper to novel-length, extended works. These larger collections are often termed “graphic novels.” The most general and useful definition of comics may be that put forward by Scott McCloud in his highly influential work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). In his definition, McCloud highlights the sequential nature of comics and also puts forward a concept of juxtaposition that explains how comics move narratives forward. Comics accomplish this juxtaposition through the inclusion of gutters, or blank spaces between panels. These gutters frame the action occurring in the panels and are also where jumps between panels and pictured moments happen. McCloud also carefully draws a relationship between comics and cartooning; comics are a medium, while cartooning is an artistic style of representation that abstracts and simplifies images. Comics often utilize the artistic method of cartooning.

Comics, up until the latter end of the twentieth century, largely featured fictionalized accounts. These stories included those of superheroes, villains, groups of friends, and young children. However, in 1980, the publication of the first installment of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* heralded a new kind of comics. *Maus* was first published as a serial in 1980, and its first six chapters (of what would eventually be eleven) were collected into a graphic novel in 1986. *Maus*

depicts Spiegelman's father's experience as a Jewish man during the Holocaust, representing Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Americans as dogs, Poles as pigs and the French as frogs.

The groundbreaking series inspired vigorous debates about the comics genre and paved the way for comics based on real experiences. It was originally placed on the New York Times' bestseller list as a work of fiction, a decision which was challenged by Spiegelman himself in a letter to the editor.<sup>9</sup> The editor's response explained that in researching *Maus*, the New York Times found that Pantheon Books, the publisher of *Maus II*, classified the work as a "history; memoir," while the Library of Congress classified it as both a "comic strip" and a "biography." In light of these earlier classifications, they agreed to move his work onto the nonfiction list. In this debate we can see how comics call into question genre distinctions and can often be included in more than one genre; *Maus II* was alternatively termed a work of fiction, a memoir, a historical document, a comic strip, and a biography. This central question regarding genre mirrors the tensions previously discussed inherent in the field of testimonial.

The publication of Spiegelman's *Maus* was followed by Joe Sacco's *Palestine* (1994), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2000), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006). These works are generally termed "non-fiction graphic novels," a term which by combining "non-fiction" and "novel" is a contradiction in and of itself. They feature first-person narration and cover topics ranging from political repression in Iran to grappling with sexual identity in Pennsylvania. What these works have in common is the way they present real, complex circumstances through the abstracted artistic representation of the comics medium. They testify to an experience and voice perspectives that are traditionally located at the fringe of discourse; Palestinians and Jews in Palestine, a left-leaning family under theocratic rule in Iran, and a lesbian woman attempting to

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<sup>9</sup> "A Problem of Taxonomy," New York Times 1991

navigate her own sexuality and her father's suicide in the United States. Reviews of Sacco's *Palestine* speak to the ability of comics to intimately portray life at the margins; "drawing on first-hand experiences...Sacco has gained access to unusually intimate testimony, giving space to details and perspectives normally excluded by mainstream media coverage" ("Eyewitness in Gaza," *The Guardian*, 2003). These non-fiction comics attempt to bring the subaltern into discourse in innovative new ways.

The comics I will analyze in this chapter and the next are also works of non-fiction. They are based on the testimonies of Latin American migrants living here in Vermont. These oral testimonies are collected in an interview with a *gestor* who transcribes (and, if necessary, translates) the account, which is given to a comics artist to illustrate. I step beyond the designation of "graphic novel" and term these comics "testimonial comics" due to their origin in oral testimony, the presence of *gestor* or amanuensis, and the necessary translation or representation that the testimony must go through in order to become present on the page. I draw parallels between these testimonial comics and the testimonial narratives discussed in the previous chapter to analyze the projects of translation, transcription and representation of the subaltern voice and to demonstrate how decades of testimonial theory can be productively applied to the comics genre. Though critics and readers often see comics as a secondary genre, separate from the category of "literature," they are a powerful medium through which to discuss life at the edge of the nomos structure. They grant marginalized voices a platform intelligible to the Western hegemon in much the same way as the testimonial narrative. The previously discussed breaks and slippages in discourse, and their resultant dehiscence in representation, breaks the hegemonic structure which is held in place by language and its accompanying

ideology. This breakage of the structure opens the possibilities for other types of relations and new kinds of discourses which, like comics, acknowledge the necessary slippages of language.

## II. Comics Theory

Hillary Chute analyzes the connection between comics, literature, and human rights in the context of the growing interest in graphic novels in the field of literary studies, in her article “Comics as Literature.” She defines comics as a “hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially” (452). This sense of duality and dual tracks for the reader to follow is echoed later when she describes how the reader of comics “works with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning” (452). The dual presence of image and text complicates the reading process, and forces the reader to participate more actively than they might when simply reading words on a page. The role of reader as participant is central to comics as a genre and for the possibilities of fostering critical analysis it presents. Speaking about comics in the context of Latin American studies, Fernández and Ramiro assert “los cómics son un medio único y poderoso de comunicación ya que cuentan historias e involucran a los lectores de una manera que ni las obras de teatro, ni las novelas o las películas pueden duplicar” (259). It is precisely the complexity inherent in the comic form that grants them transformative power; because they involve active reading and reconciling of image and text, they problematize interpretation in a way that allows the reader the opportunity to actively engage in distilling meaning from the juxtaposition.

The combination of images with written text provides another level from which to understand the text. As Fernández and Ramiro explain, “el cómic se distingue de los textos narrativos porque tiene un componente visual, una característica que también facilita la

comprensión del texto declarativo porque le confiere una mirada oculocéntrica, relacionada con la competencia visual y acorde con el modo en que las sociedades contemporáneas se acercan a la realidad” (260). Though the presence of image and text may make the reader work harder to reconcile the two, the presence of images also helps to confirm, emphasize and elaborate what the written word in the comic communicates. Comics play upon the way a reader takes in information and asks them to absorb the same information more than once; they engage with the image first, and then the caption (or vice versa). This relationship creates a shuttling effect<sup>10</sup> between images and the text, creating rich opportunities for the reader to negotiate between the two tracks of the comic medium.

The caption may not fit with what the reader had expected when they saw the picture. Comics ask us to consider the many ways of viewing reality, and to be constantly building upon and readjusting our interpretation of images and text. Here lies yet another kind of shuttling work; one that occurs between the information provided by the image and its accompanying caption, respectively. Images and captions build upon each other to layer meaning or to further develop a concept: a caption that describes a feeling of isolation may be compounded and further developed by an image of the speaker alone in a room, just as an image of a clenched fist may be accompanied by a caption that describes a feeling of anger or frustration. The reader is perpetually shuttling between image and text, working to reconcile and combine the two features to arrive at a deeper understanding of the event or feeling that is being described. Through comics, we are given two different ways to understand the same event. The viewer both reads about an event and sees it graphically pictured. We are presented with dual ways of viewing, a reading practice that questions the assumption of absolute veracity we so often assign to

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<sup>10</sup> This shuttling echoes White’s concept of the shuttling of discourse

literature and demonstrates comic's ability to work towards the description of one reality through two distinct but united ways of seeing.

In addition to the double reading of caption and image, another way that shuttling occurs and that reader participation takes place is through narrative time. In comics, authors can shape temporality in unexpected ways. Through the combination and juxtaposition of panels and gutter space, artists and authors can control the pace of reading, prompting the reader to infer what has happened in the temporal space between panels. Authors even reference moments that don't fit into linear temporality. By adjusting the number and complexity of panels on a given page, authors can modulate the rhythm of reading and "detain" the reader on the page.<sup>11</sup> Comics are also able to jump between temporalities. Moments from a character's past can be presented on the same page as moments from the present, and characters can even converse with their younger or future selves.

Using this technique, authors of graphic novels rupture temporality and rearrange it as they bring the past and the future into dialogue with the present, jumping back and forth between time periods. As Spiegelman asserts, comics "choreograph and shape time" (454). Chute further explains, "a comics page offers a rich temporal map configured as much by what isn't drawn as by what is: it is highly conscious of the artificiality of its selective borders, which diagram the page into an arrangement of encapsulated moments" (455). The comics page offers a selection of staccato moments that are capable of making vast chronological leaps, leaving the author unencumbered by linear time. The reader must participate with the author in making these temporal leaps and filling in the space left purposely blank. This is one of the features in which comics depart most vividly from the prototypical novel. Novels often seek to create the sense of

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<sup>11</sup> Chute cites Edward Said's praise of the way Joe Sacco's *Palestine* utilizes densely packed pages to prompt the reader to slow their pace of reading.

the unencumbered passage of time, immersing their readers in an imagined world that does not require abrupt jumps between moments. Due to the way we read, novels are linear in nature. They progress smoothly. Comics, in contrast, make no attempt to hide breaks in a timeline. They are not read linearly.

Comics characteristically echo the structure of memory in a way that renders them especially suited to work in biography and autobiography. Humans don't experience memory as a contiguous, unbroken linear flow; rather, we recollect flashes or moments of events, punctuated by gaps, breaks between our memories, blank space. These flashes often connect moments of our lives that are temporally distant, but that merge together in our recollection. We may remember flashes from our early childhood in conjunction with events that occurred much more recently. This phenomenon of temporal compression and stacking, accompanied by marked gaps or spaces, is mirrored in comics. In graphic narratives, we are presented with images that often jump across large swaths of a life history, featuring the child version of a character conversing with the adult version, or comparing moments from different stages in their life.<sup>12</sup>

The way the text is composed invites the reader to make these temporal jumps with the inclusion of a gutter, or blank space, between distinct events. The gutters signal that there is something in-between these panels or moments that we must imagine for ourselves, a jump the reader must make on their own. The reader must assemble a conceptual timeline themselves, piecing together disparate, free-floating moments. Comics flash like memories; unlike more traditional narrative structure, there is no insistence on linear temporal flow. As Chute describes it, comics "make the past free-floating." Chronology has been destroyed. Every moment of a life history is fair play. In this way, comics untether time and create a world that is temporally

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<sup>12</sup> See: Alison Bechdel's classic *Fun Home*



discursive and palimpsestic. By inviting the reader to actively engage in piecing together the story by filling in gaps, arranging the panels, or resolving the dialectic between image and caption, comics reanimate what is past, what is dead and gone, and place it in direct conversation and combination with the present day.

The gutters, the blank space between panels, are conspicuous. There is no attempt in comics to present an image of seamless flow, of a story delivered temporarily faithfully, down to the minute. When we read comics, we are accustomed to the way they ask us to read. We understand the demands of the genre, and travel between panels and over gutters without pausing to consider why the gaps are there. Like fiction, which is read from left to right and largely structured in chapters, we understand that we read comics by traveling over blank space. In this way, we don't find ourselves asking why they jump from moment to moment, or what events or gaps in knowledge they may be hiding. These gaps are not jarring to us in the way that Menchú's refusal to divulge her secrets is. Chute identifies the work of comics as a "manifest handling of its own artifice, its attention to its seams. Its formal grammar rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous, inscribing the context in its graphic presentation" (458). Reality has been redrawn, *rendered*, in the work of producing a comic. When we as readers consume nonfiction work, we don't like to think that any artifice exists in it. We hope to encounter a text that is utterly faithful to reality, perfectly representative of what actually happened, with the smallest distance possible between fact and fiction. However, comics require an acceptance of the fact of artistic interpretation and representation of reality before one can even start the first page. Comics are drawn, created, and written in a way that fractures linear time and remakes reality.

Like the testimonial texts I discussed in the previous chapter, comics give loss a space. They can make the stories of people who are usually marginalized or absent from the centers of power present. They grant a space for their losses to be voiced. In comics, the absence that comes with loss is made present in the form of the gutter. Comics present a history riddled with gaps, and make no attempt to hide these spaces. As Chute describes, comics “caress” a loss at the center (loc 3960). A good example of what Chute means can be found in Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel *Fun Home*, a work that is as much about the space left behind by her father after his suicide as it is about her memory of his presence in her childhood. Similarly, the comics based on life histories by migrants are as much about the country they have left as the country they now live in.

If comics, at their center, are about what is lacking, then they necessarily resurrect and reanimate what was once there. Through the temporal jumps they make, the past (in the comics I will analyze, the past that’s pictured will be the migrants’ country of origin) can be redrawn and discussed. The protagonist can flash back on what their life used to be. They raise the specter, indeed no longer a specter at all, of the immigrant’s past, reinvigorating the land left behind in the very telling of its loss. The migrant life, then, like comics themselves, is built around gaps, around memory, around the loss of what has been left behind, and the frequently silence trauma of the border crossing. It is defined as much by what is not present as what is. Migrant comics visually bridge an international divide nearly too vast to imagine. On the page, the gap between the US and Mexico can be closed to a quarter-inch gutter. Here, the two countries come into conversation. Through the interplay of absence and presence, the past can be reanimated, reviewed, reintegrated.

### III. The Process of Creating “*El viaje más caro*”

Vermont’s Open Door Clinic, along with a variety of partners, has recognized the potential power of comics as a medium to discuss migration and, as a result, has produced a series of collaborative comics entitled “*El viaje más caro*,” or “The Most Costly Journey.” The project team contracts a variety of artists to draw the comics, which are based on interviews collected by a range of individuals that work with migrant farmworkers in Vermont. This endeavor included a team of organizations, including the Open Door Clinic, the Vermont Folklife Center, UVM Extension Bridges to Health, UVM Anthropology, and Marek Bennett’s Comics Workshop. The Vermont Folklife Center’s website defines the project as an “ethnographic cartooning project that employs collaborative storytelling as a tool to mitigate loneliness, isolation, and despair among Latin American migrant farm workers on Vermont dairy farms”.<sup>13</sup> This explanation teases out several important facets of the endeavor. First, the project is ethnographic, which signals that these stories speak not about standalone life histories but about a broader community, a culture defined by migration. Second, the storytelling is distinctly collaborative. Though the comics read as autobiographical, they in fact involve two authors; the artist and the migrant who has delivered their story to be drawn. Similar to the testimonials discussed previously, the relation between story-teller and *gestor* forms a unique duality of vision and a power structure that this chapter will discuss in greater detail. Third, and finally, these comics are defined not as art pieces or novels but as a tool designed to improve the life of the migrant here in Vermont. These stories have more than aesthetic value; they are both told and consumed with a stated mission. They are a chance for the migrant voice, so often marginalized

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<sup>13</sup> Featured in the “About” section of the “*El viaje más caro*” site: <https://www.vermontfolklifecenter.org/elviajemascaro-eng/>

and hidden, to speak, and for the migrant population to hear that voice and understand that they are not so isolated as they may feel.

I analyze three distinct works from the project: “A New Type of Work,” “Painful to Remember,” and “The Most Important Love of Every Woman Should be Herself.” Each of these comics were created through slightly different processes, with varying levels of communication between artist and subject. I outline the complex creation process behind each of these comics in order to both demonstrate the wide range of ways that comics are made and to explore how differential levels of participation by the comic subject shape the final form of the comic itself. It’s important to note that these comics were not created with the intention of being literary works. In this way they are also similar to testimonials, intended to be read as documents that record events elided from dominant history. The project is envisioned as a kind of “graphic medicine”<sup>14</sup> that grapples with the isolation and depression faced by many migrant farmworkers here in Vermont. These comics are intended to be read by other migrants. In this way, they differ from the testimonial genre in terms of their intended audience. While testimonial narratives are designed looking outward, designed to advocate for a community on the international stage, these comics look inward. They advocate both *for* and *towards* the same community. Like testimonial, they serve as a means through which to deliver an unheard story, but in this case the unheard story is told to others who share similar experiences. In these comics, migrants testify to one another.

The “*El viaje más caro*” project began with the comic “A New Type of Work.” This comic is based on the testimony of Delmar,<sup>15</sup> a Mexican migrant who now works on a dairy farm

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<sup>14</sup> The use of comics as a resource for healthcare professionals (in this case, mental health professionals): See [graphicmedicine.org](http://graphicmedicine.org) for more information

<sup>15</sup> All interviewees in “*El Viaje Más Caro*” are given pseudonyms to protect their identity

here in Vermont. His interview process was the least formal of all included in the project; Teresa Mares, co-founder of Huertas and professor of anthropology at UVM, interviewed him in the waiting room of the Open Door Clinic. The interview was not recorded, and Professor Mares took written notes while Delmar spoke. She asked him general questions to prompt his testimony, and states that the discussion of food that is included in the fully produced comic was prompted by her own interest in the cultural and social weight of food. She later turned these notes into a written story in English, essentially accomplishing both transcription and translation in the same process. Tillie Walden, the artist who illustrated Delmar's story, does not speak Spanish, so she worked from the English version. After Professor Mares' English transcription, the story was later translated back into Spanish by another collaborator in the project in order to make the comic accessible for Spanish speakers. The perspective of the testimony was also translated; Delmar delivered his story in the first person, Professor Mares recorded it in the third person, and Walden turned it back into first person in creating the comic.

It is evident that Delmar's testimony was filtered in several important ways before being made present on the page. Critically, his account was not recorded verbatim. Professor Mares recorded the entire story and then distilled his testimony into essential concepts and moments. Professor Mares then expanded these notes into a third-person narrative in English, taking the autobiographical testimony to biographical narrative. Walden worked from this third-person narrative and turned it back into the first person; Walden's comic speaks in Delmar's voice. I argue that Walden's work of envisioning Delmar's world and his story in Delmar's own voice to make it present on the page mirrors the relationship between amanuensis and speaker found in testimony. Walden has had to inhabit Delmar's world in order to draw it. We also see that the specific presence of the *gestor* colors the testimony itself, as Professor Mares' interest in food

prompted Delmar's discussion. Burgos in the introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchú* references a similar relationship to Menchú; her lack of knowledge about Guatemala inspired Menchú to give more details about certain facets of her culture that Menchú might not otherwise have revealed. Burgos states, "I was able to adopt the position of someone who is learning. Rigoberta soon realized this: that is why her descriptions of ceremonies and rituals are so detailed" (xix). While Menchú may talk about rituals and other aspects in great detail in order to satisfy Burgos' interest, other aspects less interesting to Burgos as amanuensis might be left out or told in a way that is less vivid. Both the doubling or living of the other's life and the influential presence of the *gestor* that scholars of the genre have identified as present in and critical to the testimonial genre are also found in testimonial comics.

The construction of "A New Type of Work" did not feature any interaction between artist and subject. Walden simply received the story from Professor Mares and worked from that text. As the "*El viaje más caro*" project progresses, new comics work have featured different levels of communication and input between artist and testifier. "Painful to Remember" features the story of José, a Guatemalan migrant. Two members of the Open Door Clinic, one of whom knew José well, collected the testimony. They created a transcript from which the artist, Marek Bennett, worked. In this case, there was a flow of communication between José and Bennett, between testifier and artist. Before the document was finalized and printed, José was able to look over a draft of the comic and make suggestions and requests for revisions. He was able to be more active in the representation of his story. In this case, the collaborators of the project also played a role in providing feedback for the final draft. Bennett had originally drawn the comic in a very abstracted style, rendering people as stick figures. The project team made the decision that they were uncomfortable with this rendering of the subject, arguing that it went too far in abstracting

human subjects. Following their request, Bennett revised the comic and filled in the people with more detail. Here, we see the limits of artistic abstraction and a dedication to maintaining that careful balance between representation and caricature. This relation speaks once again to the tension of testimonial and the struggle to avoid a sense of the subjects as “picturesque” (Burgos) or “folkloric” (Barnet).

“The Most Important Love of Every Woman Should Be Herself,” by Guadalupe and Iona Fox, represents the highest level of interaction between artist and subject featured in the entire “*El viaje más caro*” project. This comic deals with the theme of domestic violence, and Guadalupe asserted from the beginning that she was delivering her story with the aim of helping other women. Given this sensitive theme, the creation of the comic featured frequent back-and-forth between Guadalupe and Fox. Fox was present for Guadalupe’s interview and oral testimony, and though Fox speaks limited Spanish she was able to understand some parts of Guadalupe’s story firsthand. Unlike the two comics previously discussed, Fox did not work only from a pre-assembled transcript but could connect face-to-face with the subject of the comic she was creating. Guadalupe also made decisions about style and form that would intimately shape the comic, such as including a closing page that offers resources to women experiencing domestic violence. This comic presents the experience of trauma on the page with the goal of remedying and preventing that same trauma in the lives of other women. Like Menchú, the story is told so that it may never happen again. With this goal in mind, as Professor Mares explains, “[Guadalupe] wanted to make sure her story was accessible but also not unique to her.”<sup>16</sup> Like Menchú, Guadalupe speaks not only to her own life but to the experience of the community. In

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Professor Mares conducted by author, April 2017

the particular construction of each of these comics, we can see how they echo the structures, tensions, and processes of the testimonial genre.



### Chapter III: Reading Comics

#### I. “A New Type of Work”

“A New Type of Work” (Delmar and Tillie Walden) features a decisive sentence underneath its main title. The text asserts, “Collaborative storytelling as a tool to mitigate loneliness, isolation and despair among VT migrant farm workers” (1). This statement is not explicitly elaborated upon in the comic panels to follow, but floats below the title in precisely the position one would expect to find a subtitle to clarify the story’s premise. After all, what does text below a title, a subtitle, do? It elaborates. It provides context. It explains what exactly this work will seek to do. In this way, from the very beginning, “A New Type of Work” announces to us that this comic strip does not exist in a vacuum. It is not just about the events presented. As mentioned previously in the Vermont Folklife Center’s description of the entire “The Most Costly Journey” project, it speaks to and for a community.

In the first page of “A New Type of Work,” we meet the protagonist on a farm. We know from the context of this comics project that this farm is located in Vermont. He tells us, “I am a 22-year-old farm worker from Chiapas, Mexico.” Abruptly, the following panel transports us between countries and temporalities, showing us the back of a much younger boy (presumably the narrator as a child) who carries a backpack slung over his shoulders to further mark his youth. We look from a place behind him, seeing the streets of what we assume must be Chiapas from the height of a child. The mother who holds her daughter’s hand farther down the street appears much taller than the perspective we look from. The next panel features no text, only an image of sneakers treading what appears to be sand. Soon, we discover what these sneakers are doing; he tells us “I came across the desert with people from my hometown. But because I was so young, I remember very little of the journey.” Now, it is possible to analyze the distortion of

perspective before we are given context. I would argue that the image of trudging feet, cut off from the body, could be seen as how a young child would remember the journey through the desert years later; interminable walking, only flashes of feet perpetually in motion. From the very first page, this comic is asking us to witness Mexico and Delmar's journey to the US as a story that comes to us necessarily filtered by human perspective. As readers, we can receive this story from Delmar only as he remembers it, imperfect and colored by trauma, distance, and time. His story, like comics themselves, is utterly personal, fragmented, and framed by human perspective.

In a short space, the opening panels accomplish two very important feats. First, they provide the expositional information essential to learning about the life of our protagonist. Second, they tell us that we will be receiving information through the filter of Delmar's experience. We will have to work to put together the pieces of his story just as Delmar himself has to reconstruct the scattered events in his memory. Engaging in this reconstruction, for me, creates an identification with Delmar. In my own reading of the comic, I feel that I am seeing from the very beginning through his eyes. The comic reminds me of their power as they show and tell about Delmar's early life in Mexico. Comics' characteristic combination of text and image accomplishes what a traditional novel could not dream of; the comic allows me to process his journey of migration in the way he as a child would have processed it. Comics grant an intimacy of perspective to the reader; they allow the reader to see the world as the characters might see it. This perspective is, of course, necessarily colored by the character's own experience. This ability to see not just into Delmar's world but also from his perspective means that in the space of two pages, I feel that I have become a participatory member in building this story. I assemble what meaning I can from the panels I am given, the glimpses of a traumatic

world delivered from the perspective of a frightened child. The comics prompts me to engage in the effort of constructing meaning.

The comic does not delve into the specifics of Delmar's arrival to the US. I find this absence intriguing because it withholds the meat of what one might assume the story of a migration might necessarily assume. They are the stories that an outsider like myself may most want to hear. Stories of border crossings, for whatever reason, seem to be the ones that most grab our national attention. As a reader in the U.S., I cannot read this comic without thinking of the most recent commercial played during the Super Bowl which featured a tantalizing snippet of a mother and child crossing what can be assumed to be the U.S.-Mexico border and asking the viewer to go to the company's website to see the rest of the story. After the airing of this commercial, the traffic to 84 Lumber's site quintupled, nearly overloading their server. Border crossing stories saturate today's media, particularly as a reaction to Donald Trump's rhetoric against Mexican immigrants. The details of the harrowing and traumatic journey across the border have been spread across the country and rapidly, almost fetishistically consumed.

What, then, could the absence of Delmar's border story mean for his narrative? I argue that this gap is intriguing for its conspicuousness. Due to the context surrounding me, which is hyper-aware of the U.S. Mexico border and migrations across it, I expect the comic to tell this story, so its absence is particularly notable. This existence of a conspicuous gap, a blank space where the migrant subject negotiates trauma and change, powerfully echoes the way gutters operate on the comics page. Read in this way, the lack of Delmar's border crossing story presents a figurative gutter, arguably the most important one in his entire graphically presented journey. I have argued earlier that the presence of the gutter asks the reader to participate in act of consuming the story, to make inferences and to draw lines of connection. The very lack of

Delmar's border story prompts the reader to consider what it might have looked like, to participate in the creation of how it might have happened. It does not set out for us in words and pictures the narrative structure of that traumatic event; we as the reader must do that work of imaging and inference on our own, further involving us in Delmar's story.

The first line that refers explicitly to events here in the United States simply says, "I've moved between different farms." The comics gives thinly sliced views from different properties; a cow barn, a gnarled tree, a tractor. Here, the artist plays with pace. We shuttle quickly between different realities presented in the frames and attempt to negotiate between them. The artists' ability to control pace is another central feature of the comics' genre, as authors can help shape the readers' experience of certain panels, adding more detail or larger panels to prompt the eye to spend more time and slicing the panels more thinly to create the sensation of quick jumps. This technique of controlling the pace of reading is perhaps best demonstrated in *Palestine* author Joe Sacco's work; he has been lauded for his ability to "detain the reader" (Chute) on the page. In comics, where the temptation is to rush through the pages because the reader can consume images at a rapid pace, this work of modulating pace is of particular importance. Comics authors curate the readers' experience of reading through the pace they set through the use of panel width, complexity, and layout. My eye flips through these slices of Delmar's experience as if through a flipbook due to the thinness and relative lack of detail in the panels. Conversely, authors can create panels that ask the eye to pause by adding more detail to images or by extending the width of the panel, at times even creating panels that take up whole pages.

The lack of text in the second and third panels in this series ask us to consider the picture more deeply in its own right. It seems as though the narrator is reflecting back silently on where he has been. We see this silent reflection again on the next page, where the protagonist ducks his

head and walks away from us after explaining how the language barriers made “communication difficult, especially when there were conflicts with my boss.” Silence is taken to its full extent on the next page, where the narrator shares his experience of being “*encerrado*,” stuck at home, isolated.” The heavy shading on this page and the perpetual presence of snowflakes creates a fuzzy, mindless feeling, which is punctuated by the stark black full-width panel at the bottom of the page. In this panel, we see the narrator sitting on a barely delineated surface, with his entire surroundings completely black. He seems suspended in a vacuum, the only object of note in a void. I read this image as a drawn depiction of the subtitle discussed earlier; here, I see the visual representation of the “loneliness, isolation and despair.” This image could not bear less resemblance to the busy street of his hometown in Chiapas. In picturing isolation and mental pain, it also accomplishes what Chute points to as a defining capability of comics; it “pushes on conceptions of the unrepresentable.” While trauma-driven isolation and loneliness may seem like intangibles, impossible to picture on the page, Walden manages to assign them a space in which they can come forward. Delmar’s mental anguish is present on the page, in the form of the dark black vacuum. Walden’s artistic representation of Delmar’s pain grants us a window into those invisible, deeply personal emotions, pushing on conceptions of what can be pictured.

Thankfully, our hero soon tells that his circumstances improve. He gets a driver’s permission card and is able to leave the house, venturing out to the grocery store, the doctor, to see friends and to play soccer. There is a stark contrast between this panel, full of people and movement, and the previous. In not one but two panels on this page, his doctor and friends physically touch him. We see his hands touching the steering wheel of his car, picking food up from the shelf of the grocery store, arms balancing in the air as he runs towards the soccer goal. For a man who spends every day communing with absence and the country he has lost, this act

of touch is very powerful. It is a way of placing him squarely in the space of Vermont, present and corporeal. Touch creates connections, it links him both tactually and visually to the world. I read the visual linking of his hand to grocery store products, to the wheel of his car, as a metaphor for his growing connection to and interaction with the aspects of his life here in Vermont. It stands in sharp contrast to the earlier panel featuring Delmar floating against a blacked out border; in these panels, his life has been filled in with places and people that he is visually and tactually connected to. It is here that his life finally becomes grounded in Vermont. Purposeful action fills every panel with a sense of Delmar as a functional part of a community. Delmar, in typical succinct fashion, states simply, “I felt a lot more free.” However, now that he is grounded in the American community, fully committed to life here, he begins to reflect back on the people he has left behind.

The next page begins with a panel that features a photograph of Delmar’s family perched on a dresser. Following Chute’s logic that an image is a place, this image, this cartoon drawing, is the place where Delmar negotiates between his family at home and his life here. As he looks from his present sitting in his bedroom in Vermont to his past in Mexico and attempts to connect the two, this photograph is where the two temporalities meet and overlap, where distance is bridged. Bridges, after all, feature traffic that flows in both directions, lives that shuttle back and forth between locations. Delmar is not arriving at one final reconciliation between his past and his present, but bringing the two into the same space to interact. Chute describes comics as “centrally about the relationship of space, memory, and the past: one needs a space for memories to come forward and take shape” (loc 2308). On the comics page, this image of an image, with its layers of abstraction, is where Delmar (and the reader) grapple with memories and the distance between this image and the life he is living now. Here, Walden is creating a palimpsest

with Delmar's past, where his family is, and his present, his room and the dresses upon which the photo rests. In the act of placing an image of his past physically on top of the reality of his present, Walden layers temporalities and shows us how comics collapse linear time.

Both Mexico and Vermont can be present in the same space. This panel prepares us for the next, where we delve seemingly into the photograph and see an image of Delmar's house in Mexico and his family. Once again, we plunge back to the perspective of a young child, surrounded by tall grasses and running around a small yard. Continuing onto the next page, we see the food cooked by his mother from a height just chin level above the table, the smells wafting from it enticingly, our perspective zooming into a close up of his mother's hands working like an impatient child peeking his chin over the table to see when dinner will be ready.

This flashback to home is broken by a full width panel that features Delmar musing, "but at least the countryside of Vermont reminds me of the land back in Chiapas." Two panels below show the landscape of both Vermont and Chiapas side by side. If read independently and traditionally as text, the reader observes first the panel depicting Chiapas (on the left) and second the panel depicting Vermont (on the right). However, when reading the panel above with Delmar looking off to the right of the page, the eye moves first to Vermont, the direction in which Delmar looks. When read this way, we see Delmar musing about the similarities between the two locations presumably while in Vermont, and then see a depiction of what he is likely looking at, the Vermont countryside. Only after considering Vermont do we move onto Chiapas. This reading is encouraged by the fact that Delmar is wearing the same hat in both the panel above and the panel picturing Vermont. Read in this way, the reader travels back and forth between temporalities twice in one page; first, from recollections of Mexican food back to present day Delmar, then from the Vermont countryside to the Mexican one. This work of traveling back and

forth echoes Chute's assertion that "the spatial form of comics is adept at engaging the subject of memory and reproducing the effects of memory—gaps, fragments, positions, layers, circularities" (loc 2708). In comics, time is interrupted, challenged, fragmented. The past is brought to the present and what was gone is reanimated to be looked at with new eyes.

In these two panels, we as the viewer look from behind the foregrounded turned back of Delmar. We watch him look towards the rest of the scene. We are asked to look through the body of Delmar as young boy in Chiapas, and then through the body of Delmar as a young man in Vermont. Here, it may be useful to remember the physicality of the reader, as well. If diagrammed, we would begin in the reader's body, extend from their eyes towards the comic, and be drawn into Delmar's body through the perspective created on the page. The reader is engaging in participatory shuttling between their own body and the body of Delmar, extending their perspective beyond themselves and into Delmar. They shuttle back into their own body when they pause to consider this panel or to flip towards the next.

The comic not only recreates the scenery in Chiapas but also re-incarnates Delmar's younger self, drawing him into the comic as an integral part of this act of viewing. There is a recursivity in this image of looking through the subject as a young boy, which reminds us of the comic's beginning pages, where we looked through his back towards the street. Here, it may be useful to identify this comic's use of what Chute identifies as one of the most powerful transformative elements of comics; they "ask that we look, and look again" (loc 357). In repeating variations on this same theme, *Walden* once again signals the circularity of time, the idea that Delmar's life in Mexico is not behind him but all around him, constantly re-animated by his process of remembering and by our process of looking. This circle is not closed. The experiences that Delmar has in his present day life change the way he identifies as a person and



the way he relates to his past. His identity, located between Vermont and Mexico, is subject to constant negotiations and shifts. It is a circular structure, but holds the potential for growth and change as Delmar himself experiences new events and gains new perspectives from which to understand his past life. I propose that the structure of a spiral may be most useful for understanding this trajectory; Delmar's negotiation of his identity moves in self-referential circular patterns but inevitably progresses, moving the circle forward each time.

As cited by Joshua Brown, Art Spiegelman asserts that comics "materialize history" ("Of Mice and Memory," 98). Comics put the past back on the page. As we continue returning to Delmar's childhood throughout the progress of the work, the artist, the reader, and Delmar himself constantly renegotiate the relationship between Delmar's past and present. The photo on his dresser is in and of itself a place where Delmar renegotiates old and new selves and identities, returning repeatedly to adjust who he is now with who he used to be. We participate in that recursive action as we shuttle back and forth from his past to his present, updating our understanding of the narrator and his life as we see more and more of his world, gaining new insights every time we look back and forth between the boy he was and the man he now is. Importantly, the history we look back at is not something dead and gone. It is alive and present on the page. In part, this affect is created by the fact that in comics, there is no concept of linear time. Barry calls the image "the units, or the things that move through time" (Chute, "Lynda Barry" 57). Delmar's past is animated and we are able to have meaningful recursive conversation with it, conversation that produces new understandings. Comics "stage dialogues among versions of the self," demonstrating the essentially human "unclosed project of self-representation and self-narration" (loc 288). In comics Delmar as an adult and Delmar as a child can be physically present in the same space, collapsing linear time and distance and, in the process, creating

opportunities for productive discussions between old and new, past and present. Delmar can speak with his past, and we can travel there with him, as his present voice narrates flashbacks to his life back in Mexico.

Finally, we move forward from Delmar's reflections on his past and present to his hopes for his future. He shares with the reader, "in the future, I want a wife and three kids." This imagined image of his future, importantly, includes the snow motif in the background that thus far we have only seen in Vermont, but the scene itself harkens back to Mexico. In imaging his future Delmar has not forgotten Vermont. He has integrated it into his project of envisioning a future for himself that incorporates all his lived experience. We see a house and a happy family, accompanied by a figure walking into the house; it seems safe to assume that it is Delmar, this time pictured farther away from the viewer, walking forward and farther away into his new life. Here, his life in Vermont—that is signified by the snow motif—and his past in Mexico—shown by a house filled with people—are visually reconciled on the page. The panel that follows this explanation of his aspirations features a family embracing each other, seemingly floating on a white background. This nearly entirely white panel is the exact inverse of the blacked-out panel that features Delmar alone, struggling with his isolation. It is both an echo and an answer to Delmar's loneliness. Delmar's loneliness featured only him, floating untethered on a black background. In this white backgrounded panel, a tangle of arms embrace him, creating an intimate connection.

This panel is an important reminder of the way comics converse with absence. Comics are by definition framed by blankness, by empty space, using the gutter. They create a language particularly suited to discussing the "horror of the space of absence" (Chute loc 3463) because they are framed around absence, they are fundamentally about absence. Lack is at their very

core; expected, understood as necessary, even productive. The gaps, the gutters, are where the work of change happens, where jumps in temporalities are made, where past and present are negotiated. They are where author and reader meet in the participatory effort to make meaning, to connect concepts. We connect temporalities and events by traveling through the gutter, by traveling through absence. In this way, comics are a powerful way to talk about migration because of the way they converse with loss, re-animate the past, and put absent bodies back on the page. The act of migration is necessarily an act of creating absence, and a life lived in a new country is constantly absorbed in the act of reconciling what has been lost and what has been gained. As I argue, comics negotiate and picture this temporal and spatial travel in a way not readily accomplished by another other medium. The gutters are a way of embracing gaps as lacks as necessary and productive. The gutters are the space where transitions and change happen, where jumps are made, just as the way migrants negotiate their new lives around what they have left will shape their future in their new home. The gutters draw the reader into the text, inviting them to assist in the text's completion, unseating the reader from their position as distant observer; meaning and memory become a participatory action where a bond is created between reader and testimonial subject.

Delmar leaves us with his eventual dream; to “leave Vermont and return to Chiapas and raise sheep on my family’s land.” A small, hopeful image of Delmar as a silhouetted man tending his sheep in Mexico accompanies his statement. In this page, where he discusses his dreams, the image fades slowly back into reality at the bottom. The white that represents Delmar’s future melts into an image of him, his back turned to us once again, feeding cows, the snow motif of Vermont ever-present in the background. Delmar returns to the present to offer the reader, in this case other migrants, advice. He advises other migrant workers on the best ways to

interact with bosses, and then delivers his parting words: “I would also suggest doing everything you can to learn new things.” He does not address me or other non-migrant workers as a reader. I am not a migrant farmworker. Delmar’s final assertion is a powerful reminder that I am not the audience he is speaking to; I have been looking in at a world that is not mine. In this panel, Delmar’s figurative gaze looks not back at his past or forward to his future, but directly at the reader. His message to us disrupts the way the reader had been encouraged to look through his eyes, to feel situated in his body. The reader is bodily removed from the text and placed definitively back within their own bodies through the direction of Delmar’s attention. Whether we are the comics’ intended audience are not, we are reminded vividly of our position as reader.

The illustration that accompanies these words is the barn he works at here in Vermont from down a long winding road, just as the comic had previously pictured his home in Mexico. The final panel is a mix of white space and lush Vermont plant matter, echoing once more the stylistic pattern of foregrounding images on blank space. However, the image takes up more space in this panel, and there is less blank space. Delmar looks to the right, off the page, presumably at whatever is to come in his future, and seemingly blazes a trail for the landscape that expands behind him. His world has become more populated, with more detail filled in. His gaze returns to his own story once again, away from the reader. He looks toward his own future, re-immersing himself in his own story.

In this closing scene, we see how comics are also fundamentally about desire. The process of drawing, of making a scene from nothing, of *picturing*, is an act of creating. As Mitchell explains it, “drawing itself, the dragging or pulling of the drawing instrument, is the performance of a desire. Drawing draws on us. Desire just *is*, quite literally, drawing, or *a* drawing — a pulling or attracting force, and the trace of this force in the picture” (*What Do*

*Pictures Want?*, 59). Comics are about caressing a loss at the center, about framing lack, but they are also about creation and plenitude. Even in the face of loss, comics re-picture the past and envision the future as they place lived histories and desires for the future together on the page. A lonely protagonist is never truly alone, because they are in conversation with all of their lived experience, all of their loved ones with whom they can speak after traversing temporal space in the comic. The artist populates the page with a personal imagined world, a world where desires can be pictured and made present. In the closing panels of “A New Kind of Work,” we see how Delmar’s aspirations for the future are made concrete, literally *pictured*, by Walden. Delmar can interact with the future, can share the same physical space on the page with it, just as he can interact with the past. Chute explains the motivation behind comics through the assertion that “the desire is to make the absent appear” (*Disaster Drawn*, loc 520), signaling the fact that comics can materialize temporalities both backward and forward. In “A New Type of Work,” Delmar’s past and his memory of a loving family informs what he dreams of for his future, namely a family of his own. Comics can picture what has been and is now gone, and they can, critically, picture what is yet to come.

## II. “Painful to Remember”

The collected works in “The Most Costly Journey” include another work entitled “Painful to Remember,” drawn by Marek Bennett and based on an interview with a Guatemalan man named José. The majority of this comic takes place in the past, repicturing and remembering the traumatic border crossing José undertook in order to find work in the United States and support his family. Though this comic is based largely on the trauma of losing compatriots along the journey, the first page is replete with detail, laying temporalities and countries haphazardly over

each other in a page that reads more like a collage of moments than a chronology that can be read from left to right. In one page, Bennett shows us how comics combat trauma. Trauma is about a vacuum, about empty space, about what has been lost. Comics do not let this empty space sit. They put it in conversation with the past, the present, the future. They stack temporalities to show the complexity of lived experience, the history that loss cannot erase, the people that may be now distant temporally but can come back to participate in conversation with comics' characters. Chute cites Spiegelman's comparison of the act of creating comics to the way his Auschwitz-surviving father taught him to pack a suitcase; both efforts involve cramming as much into a small space as possible. Both involve facing trauma and loss with defiant plenitude. In this first panel, the artist counterbalances the discussion of migrating and leaving with a visually packed field, populating space that could easily feel empty and overwhelming.

The introductory panel features a map showing Guatemala on the left, Mexico in the middle, and the United States on the right as the background. Foregrounded on this map are a series of speech bubbles, accompanied by images, each of which make large temporal and spatial jumps. We begin with a bubble that explains, "It all started May 21st, 2008," which is expanded upon by the following assertion that this date was "the day I entered the United States." We then flash forward to find that José has now been living in Vermont for six years, and flash backward once again to find that he originally lived in Amsterdam, New York. Each bubble that references a specific location has a tail connecting it to this spot on the map, creating the sensation that the countries are talking to us, simultaneously, through time. The bottom set of panels provides us with background information on José: he is from Cuilco, Guatemala, and spent six days traveling through Mexico to the United States with a group of 15 people. Though he asserts, "I don't know anyone," he also already refers to himself as a part of the group: "*we* spend one day and night in

the border area” (italics by author). This immediate identification of himself as part of the community of would-be border crossers will have important implications in how he tells the story of their journey.

The speaker also immediately creates a connection with the reader, and with it a sense that they are in a mutual conversation. He does this through his direct address to the reader in the following page. He tells us, “I don’t know if you know this, but between Mexico and the U.S. there is a line...you can’t see the end of it... it’s very long.” Through addressing us familiarly, the speaker creates an intimacy between himself and the reader, a sense that he is telling us this story, complete with ellipsis and pauses where a narrator would pause in the course of telling an oral history. This breath taken in the course of telling us about the line between the US and Mexico gestures at Acosta’s understanding of Menchú’s ellipsis in her testimonial as representative of the illiteracy of the Real. The ellipsis marks the location where there are things that are secrets even to Menchú herself, the demarcated limits of what she can explain to us. Read in this way, the ellipsis in José’s account of the line between Mexico and the U.S. is a signifier of that which even José himself cannot understand or explain to us. The image that accompanies this statement shows a chain link fence that the reader presumes is the U.S.-Mexican border; the border, then, is the line in the sand that is unfathomable even to José, who has crossed it. The border stretches interminably; he says that “you can’t see the end of it.” There is a vast separation José, and along with him the reader, cannot wrap their head around. José cannot explain to us where this separation ends and what the border signifies because the enormity of what is lost in crossing it is unintelligible even to him. The existence of this line and the act of crossing it have reshaped his life in unnamable ways, ways he is clearly still discovering and reconciling in the act of telling this story.

Extending our discussion of the rich vacuum of a breath, a pause in the act of storytelling, it may be useful to apply Chute's concept as the space of the gutter on the comics page as a breath taken during a musical performance. She defines both the gutter and the breath as "a pause that conditions, or is disruptive of, the parts that make a crafted sound" (Disaster Drawn, loc 701). The breath and the gutter, then, are spaces of both stillness and movement. They are a conspicuous pause or gap but they also lead necessarily to a further action, a moving along of the storyline; the song continues, the comics page progresses. The gutters in comics are where time is collapsed, where the reader makes the temporal or spatial jump necessary to continue with the rest of the narrative. José's pause in explaining the border to us is a conspicuous gap that nonetheless furthers the story, that leads to new action; namely, his arrival in the United States. This gap, this border, is the vacuum where the change happens.

Chute further explains gutters as the "thread of erasure inscribed in a sequence of repletion" (Disaster Drawn, loc 708). José's ellipsis, his figurative gutter, occurs precisely at the moment he is attempting to define the border between Mexico and the United States, the barbed wire fenced thread that erases him from his homeland. Kentridge's assertion that erasure is a kind of *pentimento*<sup>17</sup> allows us to read José's ellipsis in defining the border as a retracing and redefining of his identity as well. It is the place where his life in Guatemala has been partially erased to make room for his new existence in the U.S. It is the place where we can see a layer of temporalities, of the necessary erasures that have been undertaken in order for José to be delivering this story to us now. To use Lynne Huffer's terminology, José is "reappearing at the site of his inscriptional effacement" ("There is no Gomorrah," 4). His arrival to the US means transitioning from Guatemalan citizen to undocumented worker, living in constant fear of being

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<sup>17</sup> The concept of *pentimento* is borrowed from the fine art world, where it is used to refer to the evidence of former painting or strokes which have been changed or painted over.



found out, unable to access anything that would prove his identity or even his existence here in this country. Many undocumented migrants who come from more southern Latin American countries choose not to carry any identification so that if they are found and deported, they will be brought only to Mexico, not all the way back to their home country. In this panel, then, which features both José's body and the fence representing the border, José is corporally reappearing at the site that effaced his Guatemalan citizenship, his agency as a documented member of the public, his existence in society.

José's journey with the group begins with a speech by their "coyote" leader, who explains that they will walk during the night and rest during the day. The reader views the coyote from behind the turned backs of the migrant group, creating a sense that we, also, are corporally included in this ragtag bunch. We, as a group, begin to walk, pictured as small dark silhouettes in an empty bowl of the desert, under a stark black sky. When the group stops to rest, we hear the murmurs of frightened travelers, reporting "I heard there was an ambush near here" and fretting about "Border Patrol? Maybe bandits. People get killed..." The panel that features this chorus of worries looks upward, skyward toward the vultures flying above, as if we the readers are also lying on our backs trying desperately to find solace in sleep, watching birds of prey circling like doubts above our heads. This choir of voices soon becomes cacophonous as one group member after another falls victim to the deadly hazards of the desert. First, a woman is bitten by a rattlesnake and left for dead. Then José's "compatriot" from Guatemala is bitten by a poisonous spider, shaking José's faith that he will ever arrive safely. As the tragic journey progresses, the pages grow starker, the panels spare of detail and the desert scenes rendered in sharp black and white contrast. Detail is leached from the comic as José's sole aim becomes survival and forward motion.

Eventually, the group arrives at the border. We see the migrants pile into a truck bed, looking from above at the tangle of limbs. In the panel that follows, chaos explodes; the group has been spotted by a helicopter. The truck stops and people scatter, but in the confusion a baby has been lost. All the action is threaded through with the sound of the helicopter, which occupies the center of the page, thick and pulsing like an artery. Speech bubbles from frantic fleeing people and the parents with limbs gesturing wildly mix together on the frenzied page. José manages to escape and does not describe what happened to the baby and its panicked parents. They are left, literally, in the dust. The comic involves us in the rush and trauma of the border crossing, then abruptly shifts to life afterwards. The rest of José's journey to Vermont occurs in just one page. After he arrives in Vermont, he tells us he often thinks about the tragedies he witnessed and "wonders if their families are okay. It is painful to remember." This comic echoes Chute's analysis of the way comics echo the structure of memory; José flashes back on this crossing in vivid, harrowing detail, then returns abruptly to his current life in Vermont. The central tension of the comic resides in attempting to reconcile the two.

Having crossed the border is something that all migrants share, though their particular experience may be very different from José's. Taking the concept of graphic medicine and comics as a medium through which to process trauma, José's traumatic story serves to advocate for others who have experienced similar events. His narration speaks to the terror and confusion felt by many who make the journey, and his attempt to reconcile that which is "painful to remember" with his current life in Vermont is a shared struggle. However, "Painful to Remember" is one of the few comics included in the project that explicitly features the border crossing. Professor Mares explains that the reason for this is that the project seeks to include and advocate for a wide range of issues. With this goal in mind, once the project team felt that they

had sufficiently covered the theme of the border crossing, they moved on to new material, even explicitly directing artists as to which themes they wanted to focus on next. This intentional structuring refers once again to the shaping of testimonial by those who transcribe, translate, and write it. In avoiding repetition and seeking to explore a variety of issues, in intentionally including different nodes of experience, the project hopes to present a fuller and more accurate picture of the migrant experience. Taking White's concept of shuttling back and forth between different nodes of discourse, the project administrators, by including a wide range of experiences, acknowledge the slippages of language. They emphasize the infinitely multiple experiences different migrants have and seek to address these experiences by talking about migrant life in different and varying ways. They include a multiplicity of voices, shuttling between various means of encoding and representing reality.

### III. "The Most Important Love of Every Woman Should be Herself"

In "The Most Important Love of Every Woman Should be Herself," Guadalupe explains that she had a very different experience of crossing the border than most migrants. As illustrated by Iona Fox, Guadalupe states, "I didn't walk through the desert to cross the border. My father, who was in North Carolina, paid \$4,000 so that I could cross in a car." The narrative quickly moves on from this reference to the border crossing and progresses to discuss Guadalupe's pregnancy, the birth of her son, and her subsequent experience of domestic abuse. The majority of her story is illustrated in grey tones, other people pictured as blank grey human silhouettes. She appears both distinct and alone, the only point of contrast in an otherwise dull world. However, when she describes life with her son's father, the world gains stark new contrast. We see a small white house standing alone on a dark piece of land as Guadalupe explains, "he drank;

when drunk he was mean. When we fought, he would hit or strangle me. He left bruises on my face and body.” As she narrates the violent fight that resulted in her leaving the house for good, we see only blank speech bubbles emanating from this house, jagged and angry. The pages surrounding this turning point in her life feature a high level of black and white contrast, while the pages that precede and follow this moment fade back into the grayscale.

Guadalupe narrates her hospitalization after the fight, her attempts to find a job, the struggle to find housing and being forced to sleep in a car parked next to Lake Champlain with her young son. Eventually her story begins to brighten as she finds help from a women’s organization, gets a driver’s license, and begins to sell food. She presents her story with an unblinking eye, detailing both the small successes she finds and the abuses she suffers at the hands of others. Male farmworkers harass her and her bosses, a Vermont couple, withhold three months of her pay. In spite of these dire circumstances, she also explains how she began supporting herself and finding happiness here in Vermont. This very personal comic becomes even more so with the closing page, where a carefully drawn Guadalupe looks out at the reader and offers her advice to anyone suffering the way she did. She explains outright, “I would like my story to help other women. It doesn’t matter all the obstacles that one faces in life. There is always light at the end of the tunnel.” The final page includes the telephone number for Women Safe, an organization that supports victims of domestic violence.

This abrupt stepping away from the narrative voice and speaking directly to the reader at the close of a narrative echoes Menchú’s final assertion that she still holds secret what she thinks no one should know. Though the actions may initially appear quite different, both their intentions and affects are very similar; Menchú and Guadalupe step out of narrative flow to protect the communities they speak for, with a resultant assertion of their own agency. Guadalupe insisted

upon the inclusion of resources at the close of this comic because she wanted to help other women and provide them with options to ask for help. Similarly, Menchú says that she kept her secrets to protect her community, be it through safeguarding indigenous secrets the West could not understand or to garner sufficient curiosity to win her testimony more attention. Additionally, Guadalupe's choice to include these resources demonstrates her agency in both telling her story and shaping how it was presented on the page. It was her decision to include these resources, an inclusion that her testimony was predicated upon. The final page re-asserts Guadalupe as the author of this text. It also re-inscribes this comic as primarily a work of advocacy, not a literary text. It is necessarily testimonial because it is "a story that needs to be told" (Beverley, "Margin at the Center"), told through an amanuensis in order to further its reach. Guadalupe has allowed her story to be transcribed, translated, and illustrated because she believes people need it. Her story speaks not only for her experience but for that of a whole community, a community that is often silenced or made afraid to speak. Her testimonial involves "survival that is implicated in the act of narration itself" (Beverley); it is shared to help the voiceless survive.

## Conclusion

*Biografía de un cimarrón* was first published in 1966. In the intervening fifty years, scholars, critics, and authors alike have published an enormous array of theory, research, and commentary about the testimonial genre. The conversation around *testimonio* has been exhaustive. In fact, so much literature has been produced that John Beverley, once so optimistic about *testimonio*'s potential for voicing the subaltern experience, resignedly noted in "Second Thoughts on Testimonio" that it had become a genre without radical and revolutionary power, read and discussed only by academics and "yuppies" who wished to learn about indigenous struggles without leaving the comfort of their ivory towers.<sup>18</sup> However, I argue that this lengthy tradition of scholarship on testimony, the relationship of the subaltern with discourse, and the role of the *gestor* need not be consigned to the shelf where some would place it. This theory can be productively applied to the genre of nonfiction comics, a growing field that will certainly continue to factor into discussions of life writing, autobiography and discourse for years to come.

From testimonial theory, we learn about the tensions of translation and transcription. We explore the iterations the subaltern voice must go through in order to become present on the page, as well as the limitations of what can be expressed in language. We develop our understanding of authorship and speaking in an authorial voice for a communal history. We are reminded that testimonial narratives are, at their core, works of necessary advocacy. Each of these concepts developed through reading testimonial narratives helps elucidate key features of the nonfiction comics genre, specifically the genre of testimonial comics that I propose. In these testimonial comics migrant voices attempt to speak from the fringes of discourse; they encapsulate an experience that goes against hegemonic perceptions of the Vermont idyll and help

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<sup>18</sup> In *Against Literature*, pp. 87-99

address the trauma, isolation and loneliness inherent in the experience of migration. Testimonial comics present a new iteration of the testimonial endeavor, picturing and making present on the page through transcription and translation the subaltern, the abject, the Othered.

Scholars around the world have recognized the power of comics. The body of scholarly work regarding comics, particularly advocating for comics as a complex and literary genre, is growing. As critics pay more attention to this fascinating genre, they draw connections between a wide range of disciplines. The “testimonial comics” genre distinction that I propose is but one of many attempts to put comics into transdisciplinary conversations. Hillary Chute suggests a connection between comics and poetry in her essay for Poetry Magazine, emphasizing the way both genres are spatially organized and choreographed on the page (“Secret Labor”). In *Graphic Women*, Chute draws a similar connection between comics and music. Scholars from a variety of fields propose myriad other applications; Jacobs (2007) and Williams (2008) identify comics as powerful tools in teaching literacies in the classroom. Duffy (2009) suggests the use of comics in constructing museum exhibits. Green & Myers (2010) research the aforementioned concept of “graphic medicine” and outline the possibilities for using comics in medical education and patient care. The authors I mention here represent a small selection of the wide range of innovative discussions currently being put forward that involve comics.

I am fascinated by these innovations. I applaud them. I also advocate for grounding these new conversations in the existing theoretical frameworks of discourse and the history of subaltern speech. In this thesis, I demonstrate how decades of scholarly work regarding the testimonial genre can be utilized to speak about and better understand comics that are being created now. I hope to suggest that the wide range of new conversations about comics need not start anew in building theory and in creating an applicable body of scholarly work. It has been a

particular pleasure being able to connect a new field I find intriguing to the long tradition of Latin American literature and advocacy work that I have studied throughout my undergraduate career. I hope that others may find that same satisfaction and pleasure in their own studies of comics, whatever form they may take, and reinvigorate historic discussions through applying them to this exciting medium now gaining rightful attention.



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