

**SPEAKING OF THE SUBALTERN:
SUBJECTIVITIES AND RESISTANCE IN THE TESTIMONIAL
NARRATIVES OF WORKERS**

NOEL CHRISTIAN A. MORATILLA

Postmodernity's obsession with widening the range of texts that constitutes the politics of representation necessitates the location, production, and appropriation of cultural practices that counter 'hegemonic' political and cultural structures. One such practice is the writing of *testimonios* or testimonial narratives, which first emerged and gained popularity in Latin America, and is now gaining recognition as a pedagogical tool of resistance among subjugated peoples. As a mode of representation aspiring to the conditions of orality and as a genre that transgresses modernist literary aesthetics while concerning itself with the conditions of the disadvantaged and the marginalized, the testimonio may fittingly serve as the voice of *otherity*.

This essay is divided into three parts. The first part provides background information on the development and recognition of testimonial literature, originally in Latin America, and later on, in other Third World/Post-Colonial societies, and explicates how the testimonio, as a "voice of/for the voiceless," can be deployed as a counter-hegemonic project. The second section gives a description of the primary materials used in the study, as well as a brief exposition of the labor conditions during the historical period referred to in the texts, which serves as the socio-historical context for the reading. The third part dwells on the textual analysis of the testimonios, according to the notions of subjectivities and resistance.

Specifically, the paper seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What are the concerns of the workers as can be gleaned from the narratives? and 2) How are subjectivities and resistance foregrounded in/by the texts?

TESTIMONIOS AS COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PROJECT

Testimonios may be oral histories, diaries, letters, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts (De Guzman 605). Testimonios share certain elements with autobiographical writing, but unlike the autobiography which focuses on individualism (autobiographies are mostly about personal accomplishments and exploits), the testimonio is written by someone from a marginalized sector of society (e.g., workers, peasants, women, LGBTs, homeless people). Thus, the testimonio attempts to resolve social problems while making us conscious of the problem of communication in a highly structured society. As a genre, testimonial literature rubs against the constraints of canonical literature (anchored for the most part on western hegemony), complicates the authorial function, and provides an avenue for the abject (to borrow from Kristeva) to make known its abjection, and, therefore, in a manner of speaking, testimonial writings constitute a kind of literature from below. Given its seemingly egalitarian character, Beverly considers the testimonio the "popular-democratic" simulacrum of the epic narrative (Beverly, *Testimonio: On the Politics* 33). Testimonial literature goes beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion that characterizes postmodern literary theories as it is not only "reading against the grain," as it were, but "reading against literature itself" (58). Testimonial writing likewise counters the traditional concept of history as a linear (itself ideologically tainted) narrative dealing with "big" events and "big" personages. History, in the context of testimonial literature, is a collage of individual and collective *representations* of events, which, therefore, does not have pretensions to being objective and faithful to the "truth." The social memories of a subaltern group are grafted onto the testimonio narrator's retelling of his/her own experiences in order to expose, interrogate, and negotiate oppressive and repressive conditions that create and perpetuate subalternity.

The testimonio further problematizes the self as an incoherent entity, an impossibility in textual terms (Mills 33). The self in the text is represented by both the unstable self of the writer and the unstable self of the reader which makes encoding and decoding not realizable in any predictable way (36). Ngugi

asserts that “there are so many inputs in the actual formation of an image, an idea, a line of argument and even sometimes the formal arrangement,” and that the discourse we deploy is “a product of a collective history” (67).

Among the more popular testimonial narratives are those of Elvia Alvarado (published in 1987), Rigoberta Menchú (published in 1983), and Domitila Barrios de Chúnigara (published in 1977). Now serving as a sort of paradigm for the genre, Rigoberta Menchú’s eponymous account, in particular, has won both praise and criticism.¹ The criticism, for the most part, comes in the form of questions about the veracity of some of the details in her stories.² The suspicions have to do with the fact that Menchu did not write the account, but rather dictated it to co-author Elisabeth Debray, wife of Marxist theorist Régis Debray.³ Menchu and her followers (including Debray), however, claim that the narratives have a communal character; what should be underscored, therefore, is not the truthfulness of the events narrated in the testimonial texts but their being constitutive of a transformative project to fight injustice and exploitation (Beverly, *Testimonio: On the Politics* 73). The testimonio, in this regard, is not a historical text; instead, it should be read as among the few available strategies employed by subaltern groups (such as Menchu’s Quiche Indian tribe) in advancing their struggle against oppression and marginalization. The testimonio, being the voice of the voiceless, problematizes and deconstructs history’s traditional focus on big events and personages. Questions about the “truthfulness” of the events in the narrative, Beverly asserts, only “re-subalternize” the discourse of the subaltern, and attacks against *Menchu* and other testimonial narratives only smack of class anxiety out of the desire to confine or re-confine the subaltern within the discourse that pleases the western bourgeois palate (Beverly, *On the Politics of Truth* 75). In Foucauldian terms, textual production necessarily hinges on heterogeneity and the rules of discourse formations which allow certain events to be described.

The testimonio, according to de Guzman, exemplifies emergent literature, which is “non-traditional literature that uses the language of the common people, interrogates the feudal and