Contour and Content in Testimonial Narratives by Women in the Philippine National Democratic Movement

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"Is there a literature for and by the masses of Filipino women, or only literature for and by middle-class and upper-class women?" asks Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo in a study titled *Tracing a Hidden Tapestry.* Grassroots women's literature does exist. It is flourishing despite the "continuing. . .denigration of people's art" and "the reality of literary imperialism" (Ofreneo 67) in the Philippines today.

For obvious reasons, grassroots women's literature is primarily oral and thus unknown to the text-centered dominant culture. But attempts are being made, primarily by mass-based feminist groups, to record this rich literary tradition and to empower grassroots women to write their own words. One such project is GABRIELA's *Pangarap at Hinagpis: Mga Awit ng Kababaihang Maralita,* a collection of songs, poems, and life stories or *kuwentong buhay* by peasant and urban poor women members of SAMAKANA (Samahan ng Malayang Kababaihang Nagkakaisa), CML (Concerned Mothers' League), and INNABUYOG (an organization of peasant women from the Cordilleras). A similar project is the magazine *Bali* with the motto "Panulat Mula sa Kababaihan, Para sa Kababaihan." First published in 1984 by Kalayaan and other women's groups, there have been three issues since with the latest coming out in September 1993 after three writing workshops among grassroots women in Iligan, Iloilo and Angeles City.

Other literary works by women from the "basic masses" may be found in anthologies of revolutionary literature like *Ulos, Magsasaka: Ang Bayaning Hindi Kilala, Mga Tula ng Rebolusyong Pilipino,* as well as mainstream publications like the *Diliman Review* and the now defunct *National Midweek.*

Testimonial Literature Defined

My paper focuses on that body of grassroots women's writing that falls under the rubric "testimonial literature." A realist genre with similarities to investigative and photojournalism, *cinema verite* and *cinema directe* (Alice Guillermo), testimonial literature includes but is not subsumed under oral histories, diaries, letters, memoirs, eyewitness accounts and the like (*Ulos* 18 Beverly 13). Central to this narrative form is the articulation by traditionally marginalized sectors of society—women, children, indigenous peoples, the poor—of a collective experience of poverty, repression, and subalternity. More importantly, in these narratives people bear witness to their struggle to live with dignity and to transform the power structures that enslave them. In short, the testimonial narrative is a counter-hegemonic literary form.

Told in the first person by a narrator who is a witness to and/or active participant in the events she is recounting, the testimonial narrative seems, at first glance, akin to that more familiar literary form called autobiography or memoir. But in fact, there is a radical difference between these two forms. Traditionally, the narrator in an autobiography or memoir is a person who belongs to the upper classes of society by virtue of his/her political, economic or intellectual connections. (Alice Guillermo). Moreover, such narratives foreground the individualistic—i.e., "unique" and "self-determining"—self of bourgeois culture. Told in the heroic mode, the autobiography as such traces the process of becoming of a special individual who transcends personal limitations and thus earns a privileged status in society, including the right to speak for him/herself.

In stark contrast, the testimonial narrative, like all forms of emergent literature, "is the trash of history speaking." It is the articulation of those who, in the eyes of the ruling classes, are *basura* and *microbios* (Tadiar 49). In their testimonies, they claim for them-

selves the identity denied them not only as individuals but also as a community.

According to Beverly, *"testimonio* [the Spanish term for testimonial narrative] is a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian form of narrative in the sense that it implies that any life so narrated can have a kind of representational value. Each individual *testimonio* evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences" (16). The subversion of the dichotomy between the personal and the political in testimonial literature includes a blurring of the traditional boundaries between the private and the public spheres. This finds concrete articulation in the narrator's realization that the "minutiae of everyday life" or the daily encounters with hunger, exploitation, humiliation, and pain are experiences she shares with fellow members of her social class. According to Claudia Salazar, "Shared oppression is thus apprehended as the result of a particular and systematic unequal distribution of economic, political, and cultural power" (95).

This understanding makes possible the shaping of a revolutionary consciousness for which important weapons in fighting oppression are not only political (in the more conventional sense of the term) but also linguistic and cultural. Hence, the development of a counter-hegemonic form like testimonial literature which is, in fact, a project in popular historiography.

According to Barbara Harlow, an important component of revolutionary movements in various parts of the Third World is the struggle over the historical record (17). For far too long, history and the telling of it has been the purview of the elite, the intelligentsia. As alternative historiography, testimonial literature attests to the strong desire of the marginalized objects of history to shatter the silence to which they have been relegated and thus become the subjects of history.

To reclaim lost history is to remember and re-tell it through a memorial chronicle or narrative. For many of the victims of dominant history, this means bearing witness to the death and loss perpetrated by those in power. It means bearing witness to repression, both physical (torture and mutilation) and symbolic (erasure or denial of memory) (Tadiar 49-50). The subversion of symbolic

repression means, among others, refusing to be intimidated by institutions of power like history, literature, and language. Indeed, the testimonial narrative, as counter-hegemonic literary form, "represents the entry into literature of persons who would normally, in those societies where literature is a form of class privilege, be excluded from direct literary expression, who have had to be represented by professional writers" (Beverly 17).

This study has sought to examine the thematic and formal dynamics of the counter-hegemonic project of testimonial literature by women in the Philippine national democratic movement. In particular, the study has focused on the concerns and roles of women revolutionaries in their testimonial narratives in order to determine how they construct their subjectivities both as women and as revolutionaries. It has also focused on the formal characteristics of these texts in order to determine the specific challenges they pose to dominant, Western-dictated parameters for the definition and articulation of literary categories.

Subjectivity and Solidarity in Testimonial Narratives by Filipino Women Revolutionaries

As their testimonies reveal, the relentless dehumanization of the masses of the Filipino people by the unequal distribution of wealth, monopoly capitalism, feudal social relations, and repressive state apparatuses, are radically altering the nature of women's participation in the social order. Women are being forced out of the domestic front into the socio-economic and political arena. They have become not only a sizeable sector of the working population but also a vital force in the broad, mass-based struggle for genuine social transformation. The latter is also known as the national-democratic movement.

Women's participation in the national-democratic movement is on all fronts. As peasants and workers and members of the urban poor, they have organized themselves into organizations which promote their sectoral interests even as they coordinate with other sectors in the task of advancing the national-democratic cause. Many more women are joining the underground movement where they assume a variety of tasks including being Red Fighters, com-

munity organizers, and cultural workers. At the same time, they continue to assume the conventional female roles of mother, wife, daughter, sister. But as their testimonies show, these roles as lived in the context of revolution are rapidly taking on a different cast.

Motherhood, for one, is being demystified. To be a mother no longer means to be completely confined to the home and to be long-suffering and self-effacing. Poverty is forcing many mothers to seek employment. The imprisonment, disappearance and salvaging of their husbands who are active in pro-people's organizations is also a major factor in their having to assume the role of family breadwinner, hitherto a male role.

In the underground movement, the demands of revolutionary work keep mothers from having custody of their own children. Often, the children are left in the care of the parents' relatives and friends. This is not without its attendant problems, one of which is the mother's guilt and desire to take a more active role in the upbringing of her children which can adversely affect her performance of her tasks in the movement. Women revolutionaries like Dahlia Castillejos, Lorena Barros, and an unnamed political detainee thematize this painful predicament in some of their testimonies. Dahlia, an ex-nun who joined the revolutionary forces in 1976 and is now working in the Ilocos region, writes in a letter to her comrade husband of her desire to spend more time with their two growing children:

> You know, I am presently undergoing a sharp struggle within me. It pains me all the more because at the moment, I do not have the chance to tell you this in person. There are times when I long to be in three different places all at one time. I want to be where you are and at the same time where the children are, while deep within me I know that I cannot just leave my work nor request for a new assignment at the moment. The children are still very young and badly need their parents' guidance. (27)

Dahlia's maternal guilt and longing for the company of her children is echoed in "Letter of a Wife To Her Husband," a short letter from prison by a captured guerilla. She says:

> But I cannot help feeling sometimes that he [their son] is also a temptation to "lie low" because I'm beginning to feel I want to watch him grow. A temptation to be less daring in making revolutionary demands of myself. Those of us who are mothers (here in prison) often discuss

> this, unburdening ourselves to each other. Before, there was this common guilt that our children won't have a "normal" upbringing, deprived of the continuous guidance of mothers and fathers. You can just imagine how painfully Auntie Letty paints this in my mind, accusing me of being "irresponsible." (53-54)

Among female revolutionaries in the national democratic movement, there is a growing realization that bringing up children in order for them to be fully prepared to take on their future roles in the revolutionary order, requires a collective involvement and not just that of mothers or parents. In an unpublished report by a student activist who went on an "immersion" trip among the NPA in the Kalinga Apayao region, it is said that some concrete steps are being taken by women in the underground to address the situation. An all-women's committee was formed in 1990 to deal with concerns like family planning methods, schedules for visiting children who are under the care of relatives or friends, choices for guardians of the children of comrades, and financial arrangements for the children's upkeep. According to the report, these concerns are underpinned by the women's desire to prevent unnecessary emotional strain on the part of mothers.

Wifehood is likewise being redefined in the revolutionary context. Many of the women whose husbands have "disappeared" or who were murdered by the military end up picking up where their husbands left off in their revolutionary work. They begin by organizing themselves to demand that their husbands' murderers be brought to justice and soon find themselves fighting for issues not confined to their personal circumstances.

For poor women, the abduction of a husband by the military and the uncertainty regarding whether he is dead or alive, has a daily visceral impact that makes the emotional burden so much worse because the possibility of forgetting is obviated. For one, their husbands were the primary breadwinners for their families. Their absence literally means hunger and deprivation for their young children. Often the wife is forced by these circumstances to go beyond the traditional confines of the home and of wifely roles to become the family breadwinner. But this is hardly a liberation. According to Corazon Estojero, "Napakahirap ang mag-isa sa paghahanap-buhay, lalung-lalo na ngayong patuloy ang pagtaas ng

presyo ng mga bilihin" (101). Corazon's husband Edgardo, had been a union organizer for the Kilusang Mayo Uno Parañaque Labor Alliance before he was abruptly taken by armed goons in November 14, 1987.

Like Corazon, Milagros Reloj witnessed the abduction of her husband Enrique by armed men in April of 1988, when she was six months pregnant with their first child. Milagros considers her personal loss a loss for the community as well—

> Malaki ang naging epekto ng pangyayaring ito sa aming komunidad. Si Rick ay kabilang sa isang organisasyong naglalayong ilayo ang mga kabataan mula sa masasamang bisyo tulad ng paggamit ng bawal na gamot, sugal, alak, at iba pa. Bilang isang organisador, unti-unting nahikayat ni Rick ang mga kabataan sa mga gawaing makabuluhan tulad ng larong pampalakasan. Nakatulong din siyang imulat sila sa kahalagahan at mga tungkulin ng isang kabataan sa ating bansa. Ngunit muling nagkawatak-watak nang madukot si Rick. Para sa kanila, isang tunay na lider ang nawala sa aming lugar. Nagkaroon na rin sila ng takot at pangamba na baka mangyari din sa kanila ang nangyari kay Rick, lalo na kapag may sasakyang tumitigil sa aming lugar. Ang dating saya at sigla sa aming komunidad ay biglang nawala. (102-103)

The demoralization of the community is precisely one of the aims of the repressive State apparatuses in forcibly taking away a community leader in broad view of witnesses. But conscienticized communities are hardly cowed into silence. In the case of Ka Odeng, a peasant woman from Pampanga, the search for justice has taken the form of taking her husband's place in organizing her fellow peasants to work for a more equitable distribution of material resources in society. "As a woman," she writes, "I pursue my task of organizing other peasant women, inspiring them to play significant roles in society and to gain dignity and identity" (translated from Pampango in *Woman and Religion* (123-124).

Ka Odeng knows whereof she speaks when she talks about the need to work for dignity. All her life she had experienced nothing but poverty and misery and she learned early to question her people's continuing deprivation even in the face of their faith in a God who provides. She writes:

> In my mind, the question echoed and re-echoed: why are we still poor? My grandparents kept telling my parents, especially my mother, that we were poor because we still did not pray hard enough. The contradiction is that we have been praying, we have not done anything evil

> or wrong, yet nothing has changed. We were impoverished as ever. (122)

In spite of scoldings and beatings from her mother who had become more resigned to their poverty with the passing of the years, Ka Odeng persisted in her efforts to understand and thus begin to go about a more effective means of addressing the situation. She became a village organizer, helping fellow peasant women and the youth to understand the real causes of the peasants' unhappy lot. Eventually, she married and had five children. Her husband was also an organizer and together they conducted educational programs among their people. But her husband's life is cruelly cut short. As Ka Odeng remembers it, this is what happened:

> My husband was killed by the military more than a year ago. His death came as a shock to me. The military treated him like a pig. They told him that he was too smart so they hacked his head. His face was sliced open on both cheeks, his mouth was used as an ashtray, his hands were pounded into a pulp. His arm was cut off because they said he had been going around the whole province, teaching his fellow peasants to become strong before their oppressors.
>
> He pleaded for his life and said, "Don't kill me, think of my family." In spite of that, they killed him. (123)

Ka Odeng describes the brutal execution of her husband with great deliberation and with a kind of concentrated anger which translates itself into an unshakeable conviction in the moral imperative for struggle:

> Now, in spite of what the military had done, I have committed myself to the cause of our people. I told them that we have to continue our struggle because the plight of the peasantry has not changed, even under the new government. . . .
>
> I am convinced that as long as our rights are not respected and justice is not obtained, the peasant women in the Philippines will continue to struggle. We may lack resources but we have commitment. I have learned in my life that it is not enough to pray. One has to do something if only to become free. (123-124)

The politicization of these wives is the unintended and thus ironic effect of the State's rabid desire to silence those who are working for the dismantling of the oppressive and exploitative social order. The cruel fate that befalls their husbands makes them realize as never before the fascism of a system which purports to be democratic. Thus, they are compelled to fight back, to empower

themselves because the government has failed to do so and instead works towards their further disenfranchisement. Now, they are members of FIND, or Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearances, where they actively pursue the promotion of human rights and justice not only for themselves and their kin but also for all the powerless and the weak in society.

Among women working underground, wifehood means separation from their husbands due to the demands of revolutionary work. In some cases, it is the imprisonment of one which keeps the couple apart.

An incontrovertible proof of the changing roles and concerns of women in the Philippines as well as of the impact of these roles on the dominant social order, is the rise in the number of women political detainees. The testimonies of women political prisoners included in this study attest to the brutality and inhumaneness of the police and military institutions which ironically, are tasked with the protection of the citizenry. Also, these texts provide further proof of the oppression of women as women in/by a feudal-patriarchal culture. That the torture of female political detainees takes the form of rape and other forms of sexual harassment is not coincidental. In a narrative titled "Inside Prison Walls," Elisa Tita Lubi notes that—

> Sexual molestation or rape is the most common form of torture during tactical interrogation of female political prisoners. Age or appearance does not matter because sexual molestation serves a purpose apart from mere sexual pleasure. It is intended to force the detainee to divulge information that would, for instance, lead to the arrest of her associates who are also wanted by the military or police. This sexual harassment could continue throughout the duration of incarceration. There would be overt gestures of sexual abuse such as fondling and caressing, actual seduction and acts of lasciviousness against the female prisoners. (74)

Elisa was herself a victim of sexual harassment of the worst forms during her detention by the military. In her story, she gives a detailed description of the indignities to which she was subjected including being fondled, undressed, and being threatened with the insertion of "red pepper, bottles and electrodes in my vagina" (75). Her refusal to capitulate (she insisted on her constitutional rights against self-incrimination and to speak only in her counsel's pres-

ence) resulted in a two-hour torture during which she felt "as though I was split into two—one part suffering, experiencing everything and yet refusing to give in, the other part detached, merely observing, planning out the next moves to be taken and answers to be given" (75).

Barbara Harlow notes that it is their knowledge of "a historical agenda, a collective enterprise" of which "their personal itineraries. . . .through combat, interrogation, incarceration, and. . . .physical torture" (134) are a part, which enables women political prisoners to triumph over the system which seeks to undermine their commitment to the national democratic cause. Rhoda, another political detainee, for instance ends her testimony with the promise to uphold the cause for which her sister had died in prison. Lara, imprisoned for her involvement in a pro-people organization, bravely asserts that "the people will not be cowed into silence because of these atrocities." Belen Diaz Flores, detained in Bicutan, declares: "Sa walang humpay nating pagpupunyagi para isulong ang pakikibaka tungo sa tunay na demokrasya, nakakatiyak tayong maaabot din natin iyon" (126).

As the foregoing discussion suggests, the collectivity with which women revolutionaries identify themselves is no longer limited to the traditional structures of filiation. In many Third World countries, a "reconstruction of traditional female roles and family patterns" is taking place as a result of "political repression and popular resistance to it" (134) in the form of "national, secular movements" (141). As community organizers, cultural workers, and cadre members, women revolutionaries are, consciously or unconsciously, "rewrit[ing] the social order to include a vision of new relational possibilities" (142) based not so much on filiation as on affiliation or solidarity. This change finds concrete expression in their new title: *kasama.*

To be a *kasama* is to be an ally, a friend, a comrade. It is a word that is not gender-specific, like *kapatid* which in a sense is another meaning of *kasama.* For a woman to be a *kasama* is for her to assume a role not limited to the private, domestic sphere. But neither is it a denial of those other roles in society which women necessarily fill at one time or another. Instead, it is a redefinition

of these roles such that they are imbued with a larger social significance.

Lorena Barros' letters to her family illustrate this point. In her letters to her mother, she considers her mother a comrade-in-arms. But in so doing, she does not deny their fundamental relationship of being mother and daughter. Instead, she redefines motherhood to include precisely the revolutionary dimension of *kasama*, thus:

Ina

Ano ang isang ina?
Mayamang hapag ng
Gutom na sanggol
Kumot sa gabing maginaw
Matamis na uyayi
Tubig
sa naghahapding sugat

Ngunit ano ang isang
Komunistang ina?
Maapoy na tanglaw
tungo sa liwayway.
Sandigang bato.
Lupang bukal ng lakas
sa digma.
Katabi sa labana't
alalay sa tagumpay
Ang ina ko.

In this poem which Lorena wrote during her detention in July 1973, and which she quotes in her letter to her mother, Lorena invokes the revolutionary potential of motherhood as seen not only in the narrow confines of hearth and home but also in the collective transformation of unequal social relations.

In three letters by women cadres published in *Ulos,* an anthology of literary works produced by members of the underground Artista at Manunulat ng Sambayanan (ARMAS-NDF), a similar articulation of an affiliative social order is made. In one letter to

members of the urban-based pro-people's organization she is part of, Ka Liway relates her experiences with equivalent organizations in the rural areas and speaks in glowing terms of the rural cadres. Self-consciously, she admits:

> Ang sabi nga sa akin ng isang kasama, niroromantisa ko raw ang kanayunan. Kasi naman, wala akong tigil nang pagkukuwento tungkol sa mga nangyayari sa kanayunan. Ang gusto ko lang namang ipaunawa ay nakilala ko na ang mga tunay na kadre.
>
> Ito na marahil ang pinakamatindi kong karanasan sa kilusan. Bukod sa nagtagal ako ng tatlong linggo sa sona, talaga namang napamahal na sa akin ang mga kasama. At sa partikular na kasamang naging higit na malapit sa akin, napakasakit at napakalungkot ng paghihiwalay. . . (92-93)

The last line which hints at a particularly personal relationship forged between the writer and a cadre member, attests to the fact that revolutionary work does not at all preclude the development of intimate relationships even as it always contextualizes these in the collective struggle. Also, this letter illustrates how solidarity is forged between the comrades in the rural areas, mostly peasants, and those in the urban areas who may be workers or petty bourgeois individuals. As Ka Liway's letter suggests, this relationship is not without problems. For one, there is a tendency on the part of the bourgeois ally to romanticize the peasants' situation as being more faithful to some revolutionary ideal. This romantic view fails to take into account the insertion of the peasant class in feudal structures which constitute the unconscienticized (and they are many) as passive, servile, and extremely conservative ("Ang Kababaihan sa Hukbo").

A much less idealized portrayal of how the hitherto bourgeois woman who goes underground relates to comrades of a different class background is shown in the testimony of Ka Rita in *No Time For Crying*. Ka Rita was born to a rich family and had been "overprotected" as a young girl. She idolized her father "who is very upright and honest" and who taught her "that there should be justice; that there are such things as honour, dignity and truth" (109). When she went to college, she was shocked to discover that this was not true, that many of her fellow students were poor and many more in the country lived in squalor. Her involvement in the student movement and her post-graduate stint as a journalist which

exposed her to police brutality and other forms of repression, as well as a bitter falling out with her parents, especially her father who was "pro-American," convinced her to become a full-time member of the underground movement.

But Rita's struggles with herself and her bourgeois upbringing hardly ended there. Of her initial reaction to other comrades, she writes:

> My first struggle with myself came when I went underground, because I had to adjust to a lot of things—for example, other people. I did not know how to make friends with strangers, and here I was having to make friends with people from all walks of life, from differeent backgrounds, and with different interests, and I had not given up my elitism. At school and home I was taught to make friends only with the bright people who could help my studies. In fact, that girl who came to my home was not treated well by my mother because she was not dressed well enough. At home I had been spoiled with servants to do all the work, and here I found I was having to learn household work. (111)

The necessary change in her personality and attitudes to other people happens to Ka Rita very slowly. By her own account, she remained "elitist. . . .up until 1975." Even when she was assigned positions of leadership, she still "had not learn how to handle people. . . .and could not relate sympathetically to people." How does the change take place?

In 1977, a comrade criticized her "severely," accusing her of "not being able to give people the benefit of the doubt." Gradually, by making an effort "to talk with people in a listening way" and by developing "a historical view on the lives of the people," she learned to be more understanding and more trusting of others.

Notably, it is her involvement in the people's struggle that opens Rita's eyes to the oppression of women in a male-dominated society like the Philippines. Of this, she writes:

> . . .Before, I never realised how middle-class men treat their wives. One day my husband took me to the home of one of his friends who had nothing to do with the movement, and then I realised in what an inferior way women are treated by middle-class men. Wives cannot play chess, or enter discussions. Women are supposed to engage in small talk. I could not accept this. In the movement women are involved as equals in discussions. (110-111)

But Rita admits that even in the movement, patriarchal notions about women remain. She says,

> This experience made more concrete to me the things I had read about the women's liberation movement. This was something I felt had to be corrected. Within the movement women have their place, but still men have a tendency to bring with them something of feudal or bourgeois attitudes about women, so there are strains. My husband and I had conflicts about this in the early days of our marriage, but in the movement these wrong attitudes are easily corrected because in discussions women can show what they are capable of doing, and this makes men respect them more. If it is a married couple, it depends on the man's willingness to allow his wife to develop politically, and it also depends on the woman's willingness to liberate herself from the shackles of bourgeois society. (111)

Rita identifies the subordination of women not with patriarchy but with bourgeois society. That she feels that the problem "is easily corrected" in the revolutionary movement likewise reveals this rather limited perspective of women's oppression. The fact is that patriarchy often defies boundaries of class and extends even unto counter-hegemonic spheres of human relations. Materialist and socialist feminists as well as some women revolutionaries both in the Philippines and in other Third World countries have analyzed and critiqued the persistence of androcentric values and practices in revolutionary movements. In this study, several of the testimonies of women themselves reveal traces of the patriarchal ideology of gender in the national democratic movement.

At the same time, the complexity of women's oppression in Third World formations cannot be reduced to gender alone. This realization of the class-differentiated oppression of women distinguishes the national democratic concept of women's liberation from that of bourgeois and Western-oriented feminists. The former is summed up in a "Statement on International Women's Day" (1977) of a group of women political prisoners (Iluminada Papa, Josefina Hilao, Eugenia Magpantay, Linda Taruc-Co, Maria Elena Ang, Nelia Sancho, and Violeta Sevandal-Hilao) held in Camp Bicutan by the Marcos military. Here, they "declare our solidarity with all women in the world, especially the women of the working class in their historic struggle against all forms of oppression and injustice, especially those committed against women" (100).

Although the statement expresses the signatories support "for the liberation of women all over the world against oppression and injustices," (101) it is clearly referring in particular to the liberation of women within the national-democratic context. They write: "We believe that the progressive winds of change will continually blow towards fundamental changes leading to the liberation of women as part of the liberation of the people, not only in the context of Philippine society, but also in all societies where oppression and injustice prevail" (101; emphasis added).

Feminist analyses of national liberation movements not only in the Philippines but also in other parts of the Third World, have pointed out that gender oppression and women's liberation are often subsumed under class struggle. This has been criticized by many feminists as a simplification or reduction of the oppression women are victims of. (Maureen Pagaduan, Leonora Angeles) The fact is that women are oppressed on the basis not only of class and race. Or to put it another way, it is not only poor women who are oppressed. Neither are oppressed women to be found only in the Third World. Where patriarchy exists, and that's just about everywhere in the world today, women are subjected to all kinds of sexism.

And yet, it is also true that women are not equally oppressed, or oppressed to the same degree. Class is an important factor in a society where unequal economic conditions prevail. Peasant and working class women in the Philippines worry more about providing for the basic needs of their families than about fighting for their rights as women. Also, it is the case that poor women are oppressed by upper-class women in semi-feudal mistress-maid relationships characteristic of bourgeois Philippine culture. In short, women as women do not necessarily have the same interests.

In the case of women revolutionaries, the comradeship that develops among women from various class backgrounds is primarily a function of their shared commitment to the dismantling of power relations which have resulted in the enslavement of the majority by the minority. In other words, what binds these women is not the elision of the class conflict but its recognition. That class is a defining characteristic of the concerns articulated in the testimonies of Rosita, Fely and Marina in *Pangarap at Hinagpis* and of the wives of the "disappeared" in *And She Said No* is easily

illustrated. In the case of the bourgeois women who became revolutionaries like Ka Rita and "Angel," there is likewise an awareness of their privileged class background which enables them to question the bases of this privilege and eventually ally themselves with the oppressed in their struggle for equality and justice.

Notably, it is their liberal-humanist principles which initially cause Angel and Rita to question the inconsistencies in their social environment. Christian ideology is another important factor which underpins a number of testimonies analyzed in this study. In the testimonies of Irene and Sharon and in the letters of Miriam, for example, the primary motivating factor for their participation in the national-democratic struggle is their belief in the realization of the kingdom of God here on earth. For them this means taking the side of the oppressed and working for their genuine liberation and empowerment in society. In this sense, liberal-humanism and Christianity are highly mediated by the women's exposure to the realities of class conflict in Philippine society today. Corollary to this, it may be said that the Marxist formulation of class struggle as realized in the Philippine context is mediated by the specific social conditions currently existing in Philippine society.

There is a growing awareness on the part of many women of the particular concerns women have and of the central role they play in the struggle for a more just and liberating social order. In their testimonies, the women articulate issues concerning women in particular, such as the difficulties of providing nourishing food to their children given the rising cost of living and sexual harassment in prison. These women continue to define their identities along the same roles outlined for them in the dominant culture. At the same time, they are radically redefining the parameters of these roles such that they are now seen as part of a collective enterprise for social change. The subjectivity of women involved in the national-democratic struggle is not personal or private and individualist but political and plural.

The Politics of Form in Testimonial Narratives of FilipinoWomen Revolutionaries.

The counter-hegemonic nature of testimonial literature by Filipino women revolutionaries is not limited to their thematics. That

women choose to or are able to articulate the concerns identified above in a literary genre like the testimonial narrative is significant. According to Gugelberger and Kearney, the testimonial narrative is "powerfully gendered by the voices of women."

In this study, I have focused on the exteriority and materiality of the testimonial discourse of women revolutionaries which finds concrete expression in the predominant imagery of violence and death; the use of specific narrative forms; and their insertion in modes of production which contribute to the development of an aesthetics of solidarity.

By exteriority or materiality of testimonial discourse, I refer to the preoccupation with physical or concrete objects and events and a corresponding lack of abstract contemplation or psychological analysis in the testimonial narratives of Filipino women revolutionaries. Invariably, the details or images revolve around hunger, mutilation, rape, torture—in short, the various forms of oppression that exist in a repressive society. These portraits of poverty, exploitation, violence, and death underscore the reality of the "state of war" that exists in the Philippines today. In this war, the ruling classes, in a blind effort to protect and promote their interests, are not only exploiting the masses but also eliminating those among them who are working to alleviate their plight. But it is also in the interests of the hegemonic order to mask this reality by producing and reproducing myths of nationhood, democracy, and peace. By promoting the symbol of "nation" as an ideal of unity, those in power elide and mystify the reality of class conflict (Anderson, in Pagaduan 28).

On the other hand, in calling attention to this state of war and their dehumanization at the hands of their oppressors, testimonies of the oppressed signal their refusal to be assimilated or integrated into the myths of the ruling classes, and assert a presence not predicated on absence. At the same time, they rally together all who are victimized by the system to collectively assert their humanity

What makes possible this coming together is an image, a portrait, repeated over and over: that of the victim of oppression—bloodied, defaced, dismembered. Multiplied and circulated, says Neferti Tadiar, these portraits acquire a cult value or the ability "to

serve as image-object signifiers around which the identity-formation of a community takes place" (55). According to Walter Benjamin, the cult value of the portrait, which is an archaic form, lies in its refusal to be forgotten, to—

> give way without resistance. It retires into ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture.

This then is what constitutes the political power of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina when they parade the photographs of the *desaperecidos.* This is also the power of the testimonial discourse of Filipino women revolutionaries: in holding aloft the bloody images of their disappeared husbands as well as of their own bodies battered and brutalized at the hands of their abductors, they stoke the fires of a collective memory which becomes the inspiration for struggle.

The discursive power of the portraits of violence and death in these women's testimonies is of course not inherent in the representation or portrait as such. In an important critique of what she calls "narratives of resistance," Barbara Harlow notes that while symbols and images "preserve the genealogical existence of a culture and a heritage," they "nonetheless stop short of disclosing the context within which they are implicated" (83). Without a historicizing dimension, symbols and images can all too easily be fetishized and the past, fossilized, instead of serving as a foundation for a transformed future. Harlow argues that it is narrative which gives images and symbols the historical and social context they need in order for these to inspire the genuine transformationn of the present. As Sarah Graham-Brown reminds us,

> There are certain areas quite basic to historical narrative and interpretation which photographs do not reveal, or reveal only by association. Power relationships, for instance, are only obvious when physical coercion is being used—a father beating his 'child, an overseer driving slave labourers, a policeman dragging away a demonstrator, a tank being driven through curfewed streets. Otherwise visual evidence of power and authority is largely symbolic. (qtd. in Harlow 85)

Graham-Brown's analysis of the value of historical narrative for a more evocative, because multi-dimensional, representation of power relations, is easily illustrated by the testimonial narra-

tives under study. By their documentation of people and events as they move through time and space, these narratives underscore the historical, social, economic and political dynamics of the "state of war" in Philippine society today.

It must, however, be stressed at the outset that the narrative modes used in women's testimonial literature cannot be confused with the narrative structure of the classical realist text or other such bourgeois literary forms. For one, time in the women's testimonies studied here is not linear or chronological. The sampling of testimonial narratives included here may be classified into three: the *kuwentong-buhay,* prison narrative, and letter. All are forms which do not conform to the conventional dictates of the literary (and historical) canon and are thus ignored and marginalized in critical discourses. But herein lies their counter-hegemonic power as well.

These testimonial narrative forms challenge dominant "structures of chronology and temporal continuity" (Harlow 86). According to Benjamin, the notion that time or history is linear, moving inexorably from the past through the present into the future in a sequential fashion, is not only a misconception but also a means for justifying barbarism and fascism as necessary way stations in the straight and narrow road to progress. Such a view, he says, posits time to be "empty" and "homogeneous" with events occuring in an undifferentiated mass. The historian who subscribes to this notion of time, identified by Benjamin as a historicist, uses an additive method, piling event onto event in his record of history with some attempt to cite the causal connections between them. In so doing, he makes it seem as if everything, including injustice and genocide, were preordained, eternal and immutable. In contrast, says Benjamin, the historical materialist takes her cue from "the struggling, oppressed class itself. . . .the depository of historical knowledge," and thus understands that "the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule." To alter this state requires not a passive spectatorship but "blast[ing] out of the continuum of history" a moment of action and liberation. ("Theses on the Philosophy of History" 256-263)

Indeed, as the women's testimonies here reveal, conventional or official history, for the oppressed, is not progress but stasis. It

means that poverty, for example, is an unalterable given and the poor can only look forward to liberation from oppression in "heaven" or "the kingdom of God." But in fact, as women like Ka Odeng realize, poverty is a product of exploitative modes and relations of power very much rooted in the here and now, in material time and space.

This realization is not without a material history of its own. It is precipitated by though not completely realized in what Benjamin calls "a moment of danger," a historical moment when the oppressed feels more keenly than at any other time, the injustice of her lot. For the wives of the disappeared, this moment is/was the day their husbands were summarily arrested or abducted. For women political prisoners, it is the day they are arrested and tortured. It is the day they come face to face with the literal violence of oppression. In the testimonies of these women, that "one day" frames the narrative and results in what Harlow calls a "historical referencing. . . .[which] contributes to the provision of new archives, new sources for the historiographers as well as the literary critics" (100). Such a moment diverges sharply from the proverbial "Once upon a time" of fairy tales where time is not materialist but mythic and unchanging.

Instead of seeing events sequentially, what the *testimonialista* as historical materialist does is to see events in "constellations"—that is, as configurations of the present shot through with images/moments of the past and future. The concern of the testimonial narrator as popular historian or historical materialist is not the fossilized past but a transformed future that is rooted in but not passively determined by the realities of the present and of the past. Indeed, a revolutionary vision of the future demands that the present (and the past) be transformed as well. Hence the "blast[ing] open [of] the continuum of history" which constitutes the defining characteristic of testimonial literature both thematically and formally.

Besides being a reconstruction of time, the letter, no less than the *kuwentong buhay* and the prison narrative, "rework privatized intimacy. . . .to describe. . . .popular solidarity" (Harlow 96). This is so not only in their thematics but also in their modes of production. The letters, life histories, and prison narratives of Filipino women revolutionaries are products of modes of production and

aesthetic categories which are not elitist and commoditized. For one, the testimonial narrator does not have the "patriarchal authority" of the conventional author who is considered to be the originator of the text and its meaning (in the singular) and who works apart from and without need of a community of equals. In other words, the testimonial narrator, as witness and comrade, is not alienated from her readers who are fellow participants and witnesses of the testimonial text which she gives voice to.

At the same time, it must be stressed here that testimonial narratives are not homogeneously produced. In this study, I pointed out three broad categories of testimonial literature according to their modes of production. The first category consists of testimonies published by human rights groups. These are characterized by a foregrounding of issues like democratic processes, human rights, and the Christian definitions of justice and peace. Linguistically, these testimonies are usually in English, primarily because one target audience consists of foreign individuals and organizations who might be able to influence the State apparatus responsible for the people's oppression.

The second category includes texts published by feminist groups. Thus, their primary concern is women's liberation in the context of national liberation. From the examples of such texts included in this study, it may be concluded that a major aim of these texts is empowering poor and underprivileged women to break free of the silence to which they have been relegated in class and patriarchal society. There is also a concern for eliciting recognition of and appreciation for these texts from as wide an audience as possible, hence the provision of English translations to texts written in Filipino or the vernacular. Like the use of English in literature meant for international solidarity movements, this may be considered a strategic use of the dominant language.

However, there is also an important need to develop forms of community-based writing and publishing that challenge the unequal distribution of cultural capital and skills. Of the three categories of texts according to mode of production, it is underground revolutionary movement which meet this need. The primary audience of these literary works are the masses, hence their use of Filipino and the regional languages, and of popular literary forms like

the comics and people's theater. Also, the modes of production of such forms are much more participatory and accessible to the masses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said that the testimonial literature of Filipino women revolutionaries "emerge as a challenge to authoritarian structures and state apparatuses," particularly the traditional family structure, the repressive military establishment, and hegemonic cultural institutions. Both in "contour and content," testimonial literature by women in the Philippine national democratic movement shatter the constricting dichotomies between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective, and text and context.

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