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**FACT INTO FICTION AND FICTION INTO FACT: TESTIMONIAL  
LITERATURE AS A HYBRID GENRE**

I would like to begin with some definitions and clarifications since it would be presumptuous to assume that you are aware of my work. I use the term testimonial fiction to designate those texts where there is direct use of a subject's testimony, but where there is also the fictional structuring of the subject's testimonial context. There are, of course, a number of historical novels and not a few biographies and autobiographies that qualify for inclusion in a general way. There is, however, a stricter use of the term, which is the one I shall use, and this is a text where the subject's testimony is clearly differentiated and stands as one voice in a world, not chosen but found in full process when entered. Only very few novels have marked this voice in context and usually this has been accomplished by the skilful use of first person and third person narrative voices. The greatest example is, of course, Marcel Proust's monumental *A la recherche du temps perdu*.

I add a third requirement to the term testimonial fiction and that is the strict historicity of the testimony such as we find in well researched biography. There are some examples of biography that make extensive use of the subject's own views. In this case the biographer provides the testimonial context and the subject the testimony. This is without a doubt a hybrid genre with the story-telling, world-making skills of the biographer allied to the subject's testimony.

The clarification I wish to make is that this hybrid genre has in recent years become a major source for breaking the silence of centuries in Hispanic America. Few women in colonial Hispanic America were literate and those who were, like the brilliant Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, were soon silenced. The written word was considered, quite correctly by patriarchal authority, as an issue of *entitlement*. So long as women did not write, or did but were not read, their orbit of effective action, even for the most extraordinary, was extremely curtailed. If the colonial economy depended on a large disenfranchised sector of the population, which in economic terms was the service sector of those in power, it was clear to both ecclesiastic and civil authorities that it was detrimental to the welfare of society for women to learn to write. Of course, the racial and class structures of Hispanic America were also rigid societal forces that controlled the population. The point I am making is that

irrespective of social class and racial determinants, in every sector, the female part of the population was the service sector for the male part, but this service sector was largely unremunerated and completely disenfranchised.

One last clarification is in order. Although the structures I have described were developed during the colonial centuries of Spanish and Portuguese rule, they have persisted into our time. When I was a young girl, there was a clear differentiation between the sexes in education. Higher education was for men since they were to be the bread winners and protectors of their women. Young women of the upper and middle classes were essentially being trained for marriage and perpetual servitude, going from their father's domain to that of the husband's. Women of the lower classes could aspire to serving their own families and in the homes of the middle and upper class. Thus, theirs was a double servitude. But all women were trained to be servants.

The last thirty years have been a time of growing emancipation for women in all of Hispanic America, and part of that emancipation has been the entitlement of the written word. It began differently throughout Spanish-speaking America. In Argentina and Chile it was born from outrage at gross violation of human rights. In Guatemala it was a response to genocide, in Bolivia and Mexico to centuries of social injustice. But in all cases, it was because there was a new generation of university trained women who began to write, first as reporters or university faculty. Their numbers were very small, some would say minute, but they had found the key to the revolution: the written word in the daily newspaper.

I can now begin. Testimonial fiction in Hispanic America is largely, but not exclusively, a woman's art form. It is a hybrid genre born out of necessity when two women pushed back the boundaries of illiteracy, the orality of life stories, the oppression of patriarchy, and created a symbiotic relationship of narrator and subject. A cross-section of this writing can be construed by examining the words of Domitila Barrios de Chungara and her narrator Moema Viezzer: *Si me permiten hablar...* (If I Am Permitted to Speak...). This is the testimony of a Bolivian miner's wife who speaks with simplicity of her life story and the harsh realities of exploitation. Hebe de Bonafine and her narrator Matilde Sánchez, *Historias de vida* (Stories of Life) speak with eloquent simplicity about human dignity in the face of unspeakable cruelty by the military. Hebe de Bonafine is the founder of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina and this is her story of abuse of power and the tragic loss of her two sons and daughter-in-law at the hands of the Argentine military. Rigoberta Menchú and her collaborator Elizabeth Burgos, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (My name is Rigoberta Menchú and this is how my conscience was born) narrate a people's struggle for survival; Rigoberta is a Quiché native of Guatemala. She tells her life story of military atrocity against her people, with faith in the justice of a people's right to existence. Jesusa Palancares and her narrator, Elena Poniatowska, present the point of view of a woman of the lower classes in her struggle for survival during most of Mexico's tumultuous

twentieth century. Jesusa tells her extraordinary life story as revolutionary, servant and, finally, clothes washer in the barrios of Mexico City. *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* was the text that opened up the genre of testimonial fiction; it exemplified the efficacy of two women working in collaboration. It has historical significance, but it is also a remarkable narrative work of art. This is a breakthrough text because it bridges the oral tradition with the literate mainstream of present-day Mexico. In order to explain the profound significance of this bridging between the two Mexicos I would like to give you a clearer view of this sociocultural context.

Oral narrativity is the basis of the cultural identity of most native Mesoamerican women, but we must recognize that oral texts, unless transmitted to written texts, are severely limited in scope. Oral narrativity depends on the social context of presentation, while written narrativity not only transcends its time and place of composition, it also transcends the historicity since it will be read by persons remote in every way from that of the author. Thus, we must recognize that oral texts are intrinsically tied to specific conditions of production.

Oral narrativity in a non-literate society is markedly different from oral narrativity in a mixed society of literate and non-literate speakers of the language. In the former, tradition is maintained at the center of collective identity, in the latter orality is the collective expression of marginalized sectors of the population.

During the three hundred years of colonial history, the vast majority of Mesoamerican women were kept non-literate. And the scant few, mostly of European ancestry, who did learn to write were denied a public voice. The exception of the brilliant genius of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, was short-lived because her public voice lasted only as long as her viceregal protection kept her aloof from the public silence imposed on women in colonial Mexico. When the license lapsed, she was ruthlessly silenced.

Thus it is that the oral narrativity of the marginalized majority of women in New Spain has been passed on in the substratum of «old wives tales», ghost stories which merge with the lives of saints, legends and the general popular folklore which so enriches Mesoamerican culture today. In this respect the popular, uncultivated *Romancero* and the collections of legends are to a large extent the heritage of women.

Women in New Spain who were literate, quite naturally wrote, not for publication which would not have been tolerated, but for themselves and other women, in the minor genres of correspondence, narrating family history, memorials such as family records, inventories with commentary, and diaries. These modes of writing are closely linked to the mainstream of oral narrativity in which women's culture subsisted the conquest and eventually grew but in isolation. Although these forms of writing are scorned because of their utilitarian purpose and their lack of elegance, I counter with the significance of wit, inventiveness, and the sheer will to survive as members of a community.

In recent years the research of folklorists and anthropologists have made important contributions to our understanding of the continuity of this oral narrativity in present-day Mexico, but the most remarkable new direction that has emerged is women's testimonial literature. This genre began with the research of anthropologists on the non-literate sectors of the Mexican population. In this context we recognize the early work of the Mexican anthropologist Ricardo Pozas in his transcription of the autobiography of a Tzotzil, *Juan Pérez Jolote* in 1948. This pioneering work gave a literate voice to an oral one, but nevertheless maintained the structure of oral narrativity. In the 1950s the late Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist from the University of Illinois, using a tape recorder transcribed interviews with a Mexican family from the lower classes and then recast the words into a plotted structured literate form: a testimonial novel. But it was through the participation of women in Mexican journalism that testimonial fiction became a woman's genre. Elena Poniatowska wrote the ground-breaking *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* which emplots the life story of Jesusa Palancares as narrated orally to her. The fact that Poniatowska was not allowed to use a tape recorder meant that she had to concentrate on her subject in each interview and attempt to discern her changes of mood, tone, gesture and force as she narrated. The success of this first work of Mexican testimonial women's literature was largely due to the writer's skill and her resourcefulness when confronted with the restrictions imposed by her subject. This genre has now grown and expanded throughout Latin America from the fields of Cuba to the mines of Bolivia. Its strength lies in that it is testimonial and not well intentioned condescension and, at the same time, it has given these women a public voice. But how important is it for these women of the lower classes to have gained access to the written word? Just what is it that I mean when I say that writing by women in Latin America is synonymous with entitlement?

The function of narrativity is nothing less than the shaping of our temporal experience, and written narrativity, because it is released from the circumstances of production, can become an instrument of unlimited creativity or distortion in service of a discourse of power.

The fact that works of literature written by Hispanic American women constitute a paltry sum by any standards of comparison means that there is an overwhelming male domination of narrativity in this society. The creative energies of women have been exiled to what the German feminist Silvia Bovenschen has called the pre-aesthetic realms of women, that is, home decoration, table settings, fashion and personal cosmetic make-up rather than painting, sculpture, music, literature, etc. The ephemeral nature of these activities, as is the case with oral narrativity, circumscribes the possibility of sharing the creative work with others. The art exhibitions of Judy Chicago in the United States have helped raise the consciousness of most women to the creative nature of the pre-aesthetic.

The written text as an art form written by women will remain a relative rarity unless we reconsider what literature is in its essence and what criteria we use for

inclusion. The fact that letter writing, one of the limited modes permitted to literate women, became an art form in France and as a genre together with dialogue has been part of the literary canon since the eighteenth century, points up the fact that as women emerge from the ghetto of the kitchen and the bedroom, their writing will be recognized as containing a unique aesthetic language of sensibility to shape, color and form.

Both testimonial fiction and commentary on the decorative arts are genres that cross the boundaries between fact and fiction because they are in the fullest sense of the word transgressive of the established paradigms of representation. A woman's life can be narrated in as many different ways as writers can devise, but a woman's life as narrated in testimonial fiction is both a bearing witness and a sympathetic construction of the contexts for the story. It reads like fiction, has the imaginative structure of fiction and the dramatic reenactment of events, but it is also steeped in the personal history of the subject. For there is at stake much more than the narration of another life story; there is, above all, the construction of a woman's space in a world that has exiled her from a public space and has fixed proscribed circumstances for her activity: the kitchen, the bedroom, the hospital as nurse, the primary school as teacher, the convent or the brothel. The crossing of boundaries serves to break with traditional genres but, of more consequence, to map out a woman's space that is hers and not that proscribed by patriarchy.

The male-dominated written narrativity of Hispanic America is one of the most pernicious impediments for the development of free women. The mirror in which most women see themselves when they read is so distorted that they cannot recognize themselves; in the long run it is the person that is repressed and the distortion that triumphs.

It is most important, however, to avoid the trap of essentialism: women writing from a women's point of view for other women. The point I am making is that the level of consciousness of women's voices as authentic and important voices must be raised if women in Hispanic America are to make any progress in their struggle for freedom. There are many male writers who have written with insight and commitment in favor of the feminist cause. Carlos Monsiváis comes readily to mind, but also the most important authors of modern Mexican literature like Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo, Octavio Paz, José Emilio Pacheco, to name a few. It is not to deny, resent or minimize their contributions that I write, but rather to insist that she who helps herself will be helped. The servile, passive angel of patriarchy must be countered by an informed, rigorous and forceful woman who does not ask for what is hers, but demands it in everything she does and everything she says and everything she writes.

Written texts must become printed texts and read texts if they are to fulfil their function as communication. It is commonplace in Third World countries, and especially in Hispanic America, to hear the statement that only writers read other writers, that the general literate public does not read books and that women read less

than men because of the relatively lower status of their educational preparation. Like all common knowledge, there is a basis in fact to these observations. But as far as I know few have cared to inquire why it is that most Mexican literate women do not read books in such disciplines as the social sciences and philosophy. The obvious response which is tied to the relative level of education is that all but a mere two percent of literate women have not been exposed to higher education. E.g. women's magazines in Mexico assume that they will sell more copies by aiming at a prototype woman made in the U.S.A. who is ignorant and superficial but wants to appear knowledgeable and in fashion. The newspaper press is undoubtedly the medium of written communication for most non-professional women in Hispanic America and it is here that the battle of inventing a new Hispanic American woman is being fought. The outcome is far from clear, but the turmoil of a society in crisis has reduced the traditional power of the church and the school system, and changes in self-image by young Hispanic American women are in evidence. Feminists who write do so for this new prototype woman. There should however always be a strong resistance against new dogmas replacing the old; feminist writing cannot impose closure on thinking, on the contrary, it must constantly strive to open the multiple doors of Hispanic American social life that have been closed by the discourse of power of the patriarchy.

The woman reader in Hispanic America cannot be modeled after any specific group of individuals to whom the writer belongs. The model must be a configuration of aspirations for freedom and self-expression. Wolfgang Iser developed the critical concept of «implied reader» as the collective strategies that a written text aims for as its realization. This concept therefore is not modelled on any reader, real or hypothetical, but rather describes the design and structural strategy developed to induce interpretations among readers in general. It is pertinent as feminist readers to inquire as to what is the strategy of the implied reader of women's writing in Hispanic America, both fictional and non-fictional. There are at least three strategies that the feminist writer can bring together whether she is writing fiction or non-fiction.

The first is the proposal of freedom itself as the point of departure for the text's disclosure. The freedom of the individual is not some overt trait or situation; it is not self evident; it can only be proposed for others and believed in by oneself. As a woman I can only begin speaking about another woman's freedom because I believe in my freedom; that is, I am what I can do and I can do what I am. Freedom is realized not in itself, as a concept, but by what I do, what I produce, what I say.

The second strategy for writing comes directly from the first of self-affirmation and this is the strategy of affirming freedom for you; if the first person was my starting point as self-affirmation, the second person of my dialogical partner is the second. I will thus speak to you with the same affirmation that you are as free as I am. It is in this movement from the first person singular to the second person that the strategy will get its thrust. This is the entanglement of you and I finding a way where each of us can maintain her freedom without taking away the freedom of the other.

The most difficult strategy to develop is the third one which is the paradox of freedom for the third person who I do not know, with whom I may never have any contact save through the text and who may be the enemy. How can I write a text that liberates me and you, my fellow women, and offers freedom to him? This is the paradoxical nature of women's writing. When I write a paper like this one I write it for both women and men and I do so knowing that there are very powerful value judgments at work which will to some extent control the reception of what I have to say. My way out of the paradox in the elaboration of the third strategy is to avoid endings that end. Closure of an argument, an interpretation, a descriptive piece of reporting or a short story, that leave no way out for another point of view is the denial of freedom. My third strategy, therefore, which encompasses the first two is to open the debate but never close it completely, state a position but allow fully for a counter position, argue strongly for my point of view but respect the other point of view, show no reluctance to attack ideological distortion but accept the possibility that my own prejudgments are in need of reassessment. What are the practical consequences of these strategies for an implied reader? Fierce disagreement, which always holds out the possibility of a new understanding. I rule out compromise and generalized agreement as utopic, but I plan for breakthrough moments in thinking which can trigger new ideas. The hybrid genres of fact and fiction which have taken on such an important place in contemporary writing by Hispanic American women, will continue to prosper and grow irrespective of what you or I think about them. But my argument is that our awareness and knowledge of Hispanic America will be much poorer if we do not take them into consideration.

The hybrid genres I have described in this paper will not be accepted in the canon because they challenge the patriarchal nature of the canon itself. This does not mean that they can be ignored or that they will establish an alternative feminist canon as indeed some have proposed. What is happening is far more important; the validity of the canon is now questionable. Some interpret this state of affairs as disruptive and chaotic, but I would remind all concerned that revolutions are always disruptive, indeed their primary initial goal is precisely to disrupt the business as usual exercise of power. Lest my views be misunderstood, I have not been arguing for inclusion into the club, but rather to break up the club.