Distributing Consciousness: Catalysts and Impediments for Indigenous Testimonio

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A B S T R A C T

A genre constituting the access point for creative representation of marginalized peoples, testimonies, people’s narrated experiences, denunciations and aspirations, generate manifold political, cultural and social repercussions. This paper discusses how the integrity of these repercussions, always collective in nature, are maintained or debilitated through distinct distribution strategies. Traditional Western distribution in the Latin American context is discussed in relation to its emphasis on individualism, audience passivity and the “reality effect,” all concepts testimonio challenges and at times fails to uphold. Analyzing the distribution of works by Guatemalan indigenous activist/author Rigoberta Menchú and Bolivian director Jorge Sanjinés, both of whom focus on forging collective indigenous consciousness, helps reveal the relation between the genre and the social movements and national projects from which it emerges and which it represents. In Menchú’s case, those movements encouraged the pursuit of wide distribution harmful to testimonio’s effectiveness, while Sanjinés treated them as a challenge to be overcome for the formation of a more effective and useful genre. Ultimately, these findings suggest that testimonio’s power to recast indigenous peoples as viable protagonists in Latin America is contingent on mitigating both the impact of Western consumption and the influence of social/national projects, projects which often distribute testimonio for purposes antithetical to the fundamental purpose of the genre.

F A C U L T Y  M E N T O R

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It is rare to encounter a student like Michael Abbott who independently defines a research project and actively seeks out ways to accomplish it simply because he or she wants to gain a more complex understanding. As a Language major Michael Abbott first called my attention when he distinguished himself in my class on Andean Film and Media in the Fall of 2009. He contributed thoughtful interventions during class discussion and then proved to have a keen analytical mind and talent as a writer when he completed his final paper for the course. The class sparked his interest in Andean culture and the legacies of colonial power, and the opportunities the media might offer for challenging racist traditions. In the fall of 2010 he took a class with a colleague, Alessandro Fornazzari, in the Hispanic Studies department which again engaged his interest in the question of power and representation, this time thought through the literary testimonio. Michael contacted me in January because he couldn’t let go of the topic, because he continued to be fascinated by the Andean context, and because he simply felt that he needed to find out more. It is rewarding to support such intellectual curiosity. We exchanged ideas, drafts, and comments over email throughout the Winter quarter as Michael kept making progress on his paper. I always looked forward to opening those emails. Michael is a smart, detail-oriented and persistent thinker and a pleasure to interact with.

A U T H O R

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Michael Abbott is a third year Language major completing studies of Italian and Spanish. At UCR, Michael developed a passion for Latin American literature and the indigenous peoples of the region. With assistance from Visiting Professor Frida Oswald, Michael authored an article published in Spanish on the roles of individuals in socially conscious works of fictional literature. He has tutored in the University Writing Program, taught English in Spain, and is currently engaged in the study of the Nahuatl language. Michael thanks Professor Schiwy for her help and invaluable research in the field.
INTRODUCTION

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Testimonio - Spanish for “testimony” - is a genre in which the authority of the author is replaced by authority derived from the experiences of witnesses. Traditional relations between individual authors and readers become blurred in “truly democratic and egalitarian” testimonio where all experiences, denunciations, and aspirations become collective in nature (Beverley 34). With this in mind, Stewart’s assertion that “aesthetic forms can be taken as central to the epistemological and ethical possibilities of culture’s emergence” casts testimonio in a decisive role as a creator of collective consciousness (14). In the context of Latin America, this role of the genre has been embraced by the continent’s marginalized indigenous peoples in their attempt to forge an identity autonomous from Western hegemony. At once an opportunity and a danger, testimonio’s appropriation of Western creative institutions such as literature and cinema also implies the appropriation of Western distribution strategies. For the purposes of testimonio, however, many of these strategies and the traditions they establish are utterly incompatible with the goals of raising collective consciousness. It is precisely for this reason that testimonio best attains its goal when distributed and consumed in closed environments that favor fully autonomous indigenous control and response to conscientization efforts.

Pivotal in understanding testimonio and its repercussions as a genre is the way in which social movements give rise to indigenous empowerment in all spheres of public life, even its creative facets. In the Latin American context, testimonio arises in order to give voice to those whose situation on the margins excludes them from access to forms of expression. Referencing Beverley, the emergence of the genre can be traced as a teleology from a focus on raising individual consciousness to collective consciousness. Initially, Western texts such as autobiographies and secular works gave validity to the conception of the centrality of the individual, a figure responsible for disseminating Christianity and sustaining nascent forms of capitalism. A shift toward the possibility of collective consciousness occurs only after the chance to “witness and be a part of the emerging culture of the international/popular-democratic subject in its period of ascendency” emerges in the revolutionary fervor of 20th century Latin America (Beverley, “Margin” 43). However, Beverley’s evolutionary teleology clearly derived from the Western concept of Marxism underlying many, but certainly not all, Latin American movements becomes more complicated when considering distribution techniques. Although apparently beneficial to constituting collectivity through social movements, these methods are actually more conducive to creating and perpetuating Western individual consciousness and imposing restrictive national projects than fomenting autonomous indigenous collective consciousness.

Only by renouncing the urge to engage in the massive distribution of a social movement’s message can testimonio attain its goal as a “project that aspires to be hegemonic in its own right” (Beveley, “Our” 75). Exemplifying both ends of the spectrum, the works of testimonio by Guatemalan indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú and Bolivian director Jorge Sanjinés engage in two distinct distribution factors in accordance to the social movements they represent or specifically oppose. Characteristics innate to the personal backgrounds of the two as well as the forms of their work - literary for Menchú, cinematographic for Sanjinés - contribute to the distribution strategies which either hinder or impel the process of raising consciousness. Menchú’s widely disseminated work Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia starkly contrasts with the increasingly less commercialized, less distributed and ultimately more successful films of Sanjinés in establishing an alternative hegemonic project based on indigenous collective consciousness. Doing this implied eschewing Western constructs of individualism, passivity and state-condoned reality based on mass distribution and consumption of texts traditionally used to deter indigenous collective conscientization in the past.

In the case of Menchú, a K’iche’ Maya woman who relates the testimonio of her indigenous community’s traditions as well as its uprising against a brutal regime during Guatemala’s civil war, the supposition of truth inherent to the process of giving and widely disseminating testimony
propitiates individual consciousness in the West where the work was distributed. After all, the massive distribution and consumption of material perceived as factual, in Latin America, has historically been linked to the inauguration of collective entities dependant on individuals; in testimonio, the opposite effect is sought as collective consciousness envisages individual members of communities as merely parts of a more important whole.

Most notably, this phenomenon can be observed in Anderson’s explanation for the creation of distinct Latin American nation-states from a shared colonial past. Anderson’s thesis argues that the advent of newspapers, massively distributed texts with a supposition of truth like testimonio, gave rise to “imagined communities” of individuals (mainly criollos and mestizos involved in print capitalism, not non-capitalistic indigenous peoples) linked through relationships made tangible in the pages of newspapers. However, these links, when distributed to a “specific assemblage of fellow-readers,” are perceived as real by individuals who partake in the consumption of the information that unites them (Anderson 62). This in turn constitutes what Beverley terms the “reality effect,” defined as “sensation of experiencing the real that has determinate effects on the reader” (Beverley, “Margin” 40). If consuming newspapers collectively makes the imagined community coalesce around an apparently objective reality, the Latin American nation-state for instance, it follows that testimonio merely aspires to do the same with an equally objective reality.

This mistaken reading of testimonio, focused on “imagining” what it means to be indigenous in Guatemala rather than “reimagining” indigenous identity as separate from the nation-state - akin to how these entities imagined themselves as separate from Spanish colonial power- subjects the genre to debilitating scrutiny in its proposal of an alternative hegemony built collectively rather than individually. Since massive distribution of factual information is equated with hegemonic identity formation, especially individualism in the Latin American context, Menchú’s widely consumed testimonio published in 1982 loses its potential as a catalyst for collective indigenous consciousness. For the purposes of Menchú’s work, conceived as “not only the story of my [Menchú’s] life, [but] also the life of my people,” this Western tradition of distribution sees in Menchú an individual, an author with full authority over her text and its support of a specific indigenous/revolutionary entity (1). Whereas Anderson presents newspaper distribution as the basis for individuals sustaining national entities, Western readers perceive Menchú’s book as the cornerstone of an individual’s support of an insurgent band of peasants and indigenous peoples in the Guatemalan Civil War. In any case, Menchú’s attempts at “reimagining” and gaining consciousness of indigenous identity - of reevaluating and asserting their collective role in Western societies - fall short the very moment that wide distribution, a consequence of Menchú’s pursuit of international support against the oppressive Guatemalan state, perceives Menchú as the individual spokesperson for a static cause as opposed to the initiator of a collective and dynamic process of conscientization.

Needless to say, Menchú as an individual author is much more subject to criticism for the reality effect she employs than the effect created by an entire system of print capitalism. For this reason, the juxtaposition in Menchú’s book of personal testimony alongside commentary on indigenous traditions and the systematic suffering of all Guatemalan indigenous peoples generates a particular reality effect. From all this, Menchú infers a story of shared oppression among different indigenous group from the totality of indigenous experience in the context of the Guatemalan nation-state. However, this effect is perceived as fallacious in Western eyes rather than as one possible alternative reality as occurs with newspaper consumption and its creation of many distinct national realities in Latin America. Menchú’s reality effect is harshly criticized as disingenuous; no more than an individual creation in the eyes of Western audiences for whom Menchú - the individual supporting the collective - becomes the yardstick for measuring indigenous collectivity. In this sense, it follows that perceived distortions of any part of her individual story, including the exact details of her brother’s death and her education level as questioned by David Stoll, are conscious fabrications whose negative repercussions affect not only Menchú the individual, but also the movement she represents.
Of particular interest is American anthropologist David Stoll’s derision of leftist military forces immersed in a war against the right-wing Guatemalan government through an explicit attack on the individual figure of Menchú as a representative of the movement. Stoll’s critique focuses on Menchú as an unreliable individual witness based, ironically enough, on the testimony of fellow Guatemalans who assert, for instance, that Menchú was not present at the execution of her brother as portrayed in the book, thus discrediting Menchú as a witness (Stoll 8-10). The incessant focus on Menchú the individual distinguishes Stoll as a Western reader whose assumption that testimonio is literal testimony derived from “reliable sources of information and representative voices for entire social classes” leaves no room for collective engagement with the text (Stoll 11). Starkly contrasting with the passive individual engagement implied in the consumption of newspapers and other factual texts, testimonio calls for active collective engagement with the subjective and objective elements that constitute truth. Stoll’s attack against Menchú brings to mind the famous words Frantz Fanon who remarked that “for the native, objectivity is always directed against him” (61). Lamentably, Fanon’s words are even more relevant in Latin America where objectivity is a potent tool for Western identity creation and perpetuation in exchange for indigenous identity destruction.

Regardless of the validity of Stoll’s arguments regarding the validity of Menchú as a witness, the critic does bring up the important issue of appropriation inherent to testimonio. If in testimonio “control of representation does not flow only one way,” then marginalized subjects appropriate forms of expression at the same time that sympathetic Western audiaces appropriate Menchú as the infallible example of her collective indigenous movement (Beverley, “Margin” 38). Audiences in the West, especially those of the 1980s eager to impulse change in Latin America, albeit from afar, in terms of human rights, democracy and the struggle against right-wing oppression saw in Menchú a bridge between their aspirations and her tangible struggle and story to fulfill them. Unwavering solidarity with Menchú the individual author can therefore be read as an inauguration of Western individual readers as “imagined” parts of the collective social movement finally given a voice through massive distribution. Removed from a local context wherein indigenous Guatemalans gain collective consciousness of a shared situation of oppression, however, Menchú’s testimonio is “reappropriated” and weakened by both Western sympathizers and detractors conceived wholly as individuals. Through this reappropriation, the book is considered in individual terms foreign to the collective purpose and alternative hegemonic project supposed by the genre. As a result of this process, the movement is personified individually rather than represented collectively by Menchú.

In much the same way that the implications of massive distribution in the Western world appropriate and consume Menchú’s testimonio as fully factual, distribution in more closed national settings for the purpose of imposing collective consciousness also constitutes a threat to testimonio. Such is the case of Jorge Sanjinés, a director whose recognition of the dangers of distributing works employed for the purposes of perpetuating institutional power, regardless of its political affiliation, served as the impetus for an evolution towards more efficient testimonio. By shifting the focus of his work from working class to indigenous subjects, Sanjinés encompasses indigenous peoples not as passive recipients of propaganda material, a role lamentably reserved for the working class individuals incorporated by the Bolivian state’s reimagining of itself, but rather as active creators of an alternative hegemonic reality.

His career coinciding with a period of decline for the leftist MNR government brought to power through the success of a revolution in 1952, Sanjinés is forced to reconcile the effects of distributing material presented as factual to foment passive adherence to the MNR’s national project with a testimonio project of participatory collective action. In a manner akin to print capitalism’s creation of nation-states, the MNR government generates an a posteriori national reality from imagining and enacting tangible links through mass distribution and consumption employed to reconstruct and strengthen in a top-down approach the individual consciousness linked to governmental entities. Although most films produced by the ICB (Cinematographic Institute of Bolivia), the filmmaking wing of the MNR government, were not explicit works of testimonio, but rather newsreels, their use as “a tool of ideological nation-building…their bombastic voice-overs and linear narrative
structures were designed to create an unquestioning revolutionary spirit in their spectators” (Woods 68). The distribution of such newsreels presented a state-view of “viewers as a coherent body of like-minded individuals moving together in transition towards development in the safe guiding hands of the MNR” (Woods 68).

Conceived as passively receptive individuals similar to Freire’s students in the “banking method,” institutional distribution channels in the MNR’s Bolivia favored reimagining the conception of the state through individuals as opposed to reimagining collectives (workers, indigenous peoples, etc.) in terms that go beyond the reach of the state (71-86). The Freirean pedagogical conception of the “banking method” views students, or in the case of Bolivia, citizens, as empty vaults to be filled with “knowledge” imposed from above, thus making institutional distribution counterproductive to testimonio’s goal of collective conscientization. For Freire this system does not generate true knowledge in the sense that engagement with the process of knowledge formation and a critical understanding for the furthering of collective conscientization is ignored. The passive relationship engendered by institutional distribution inaugurates an “imagined community” composed of individuals conceived as such only in their affinity toward the state, generating a “reimagined” state whose image is projected onto submissive masses of individuals to which it owes its existence. On the other hand, the active and participatory relationship espoused by Freire and enacted by Sanjinés in his first testimonio film Revolución (1963) creates a nascent form of liberatory testimonio “ruled simultaneously by paradigms of individualism (uniqueness) and of collectivity (exemplarity)” that acknowledges both individualism and collectivity without subjugating the one to the other (Pratt 42).

Revolución lays the groundwork for Sanjinés’ evolution toward an extremely closed form of distribution wherein cases like the vilification of Menchú’s book on a flawed individual basis in the West are avoided to instead encourage autonomous conscientization. Woods’ analysis of the film as a filter of the revolutionary process through images, arguing that Sanjinés seeks to uproot “spectatorial passivity” through “a visceral participation with images,” signals a fundamental change in distribution strategies from imagining oneself as merely an individual working class component of the national project to empowering collectives to engage in alternative hegemonic projects (68). Sanjinés attains this by presenting images of children gazing directly at the camera; present at both the beginning and end of the film, these images, especially those at the film’s end, are viewed through the filter of the film’s juxtaposition of working class suffering and scenes of an embryonic revolution in a way that “compels the viewer to engage in an altogether new evaluation of post-revolutionary Bolivia” (Wood 70).

However, for Sanjinés this process is more than a mere evaluation contained within theaters. Revolución proposes new ways of evaluating through distribution and consumption strategies that attempt to recover the collective facet of the Bolivian working class. Specifically, the lack of collective popular response to harsh labor conditions, death and poverty depicted early in the film until a politician appropriates these working class experiences, coalesces them and distributes them to passive individuals, suggests that the success of the national/revolutionary project lies in recasting itself rather than the collective groups it theoretically represents. Such criticisms would not be uncommon in Bolivia at the time, a nation whose conservative economic policies enacted by President Zuazo (1956-1960) to control inflation signaled “massive financial support from the United States…as well as political offenses against the syndicalist working class” (King 485-86). In this way, Revolución is a testimonio film directed toward the working class which attempts to recover a collective soul disjointed and broken by a revolutionary project encouraging institutional adherence over the forging of an alternative hegemonic project, thus denying workers “the opportunity of reflection and allow[ing] merely the illusion of acting” (Freire 126).

Although a noble attempt, Sanjinés soon sought alternative subjects untainted by the interpellation of the Bolivian state. In constitute the backbone of “nationalist movements... invariably populist in outlook [which] sought to induct lower class into political life,” Sanjinés perceived in the working class a disconcerting complacency with their role as passive subjects (Anderson 47). Coincidentally, synchronous state-sponsored films by Jorge Ruiz such as
La vertiente (1958) and Las montañas no cambian (1962) began to reach indigenous peoples in ways that sought to induct and appropriate their experiences into the national project. Hegemonic identity forming materials, previously solely newspapers limited in distribution to urban centers and literate citizens, evolved into cinematographic products allowing indigenous peoples the chance to access and partake in the hegemonic “imagining” process of the Bolivian nation for the first time. Thus began the interpellation of indigenous audiences as passive consumers encouraged to “imagine” themselves in the MNR’s Bolivia as the recipients not only of state-distributed films, but also of the benefits of the government’s projects depicted on-screen; water projects in La vertiente contrast with wider aspects of modernization in Las montañas in such a way that weakens indigenous autonomy and self-sufficiency by these new technologically and politically motivated distribution methods.

In this sense, the criticism that Hollywood film is “destined to satisfy only the ideological and economic interests of the owners of the film industry” can also be extended to the MNR’s control over cinematic distribution (Solanas and Getino 33). Given the opportunity to “act” only within the confines established by MNR-supported ICB films, the agency implied by the act of autonomously creating and exerting alternative hegemonic power as occurs in testimonio is suppressed. With this in mind, Sanjinés leaves the ICB, forming an independent company called Grupo Ukamau in 1968. Realizing that state-supported distribution is a tool of institutionalized passivity and subjection to dominant hegemony, Sanjinés pursues through the closed distribution of his subsequent testimonio films an active engagement of indigenous peoples not only as viewers, but also as “reimagined” peoples in Bolivia.

Tracing this evolution of closed distribution “primarily intended for consumption by indigenous and campesino viewers” gives an idea of the success of Sanjinés’ testimonio film in raising indigenous consciousness even through its failures (Schiwy 75). For instance, the reality effect of the film Yawar mallku (1969) is criticized in these closed indigenous environments not as false nor as a political ploy to gain support, but rather as not in accordance with indigenous ways of telling stories in a collective sense. The film’s denunciations through the individual story of Ignacio of Peace Corps abuses in Bolivia and the negation of indigenous identity have little validity in collective testimonio and indigenous settings. Correcting these errors implies that conscientization in testimonio works flowed evenly between socially responsible Bolivians like Sanjinés and indigenous peoples in the “great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well” through respect for indigenous self-determination (Freire 44). In this sense, moves by Sanjinés to relinquish control over production constituted the ultimate sign of indigenous consciousness as passive viewers no longer. Following the “failure,” in Sanjinés’, opinion of Yawar mallku, Sanjinés films El coraje del pueblo. This testimonio film retells a historical event in indigenous terms by including actual participants of a government ordered massacre on indigenous miners (Sanjinés 20-22). As creators engaged in collective cinematographic production, El coraje del pueblo signals new currents of indigenous control and autonomy feasible in closed settings.

For testimonio, the ascendancy of indigenous peoples as viable protagonists in the Latin American context has been inextricably linked to both the urge to disseminate indigenous experiences and the implications of massive distribution in the West. Succumbing to this urge, the principal problem and ultimate weakness of Menchú’s book, brings to light aspects of individualism, reappropriation and factual truth (or at least its perception as such). However, in recognizing these issues and constructing alternative channels of distribution - alternative ways of interpreting indigenous identity and associating with knowledge and collective consciousness in a participatory manner - Sanjinés lays the very early foundation of modern indigenous movements in Bolivia which “transcend election policies and the state” traditionally linked to massive distribution, creating instead a truly alternative hegemonic project (Schiwy 212). Transcendence of the nation-state and individualism posits a genre in which identity creation is organic and based on decidedly indigenous truths and collective worldviews rather than imposed. The testimonio appropriation in closed indigenous Bolivian settings of cinema, a critical creative institution of Western cultural hegemony, has endowed indigenous people with an assertive spirit.
replicated recently in politics through the election of the nation’s first indigenous president, Evo Morales. Passive consumers no longer, these advances contrast starkly with the continued discrimination practiced against indigenous Guatemalans in the form of limited economic resources, the inability to participate in political process, etc. (CIDM 2006). Widespread internationally consumed forms of representation became incorporated into Western cultural hegemony even as alternatives to it were sought in works such as Menchú’s, thus perpetuating and consolidating the stagnation of indigenous identity in Western settings.

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