

**Undisciplining Testimonios:
Border-Crossing Pedagogies in Territory and Text¹**

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“Sentada en la orilla del mundo, estoy enfrentando a la muerte, pero no me voy a rendir, porque la vida es muy bella, y más bonita sería, si no existiera el miedo, si no existieran las fronteras” (Murrieta 2010, 87). This is the opening of a poem penned on a chocolate wrapper in the Sonora desert by the protagonist of an experimental testimonio published in Oaxaca in 2010. These lines offer an example of the hybrid form that characterizes the book, *Sentada frente a la muerte en el silencio del desierto*, more broadly. A combination of personal narrative, poetic reflection, and political analysis is woven together through the peculiar voice of a third person narrator created to embody the lived experience of the author, identified only by a pseudonym, Alma Murrieta. For these and other reasons, the book seems to defy tidy classification as either a work of fiction or non-fiction. But what is perhaps more interesting is the way that it clearly asserts itself as a testimonio, while destabilizing the conventions of the genre that have by now become clearly codified in Latin American literary and cultural studies. While testimonio enjoyed considerable critical attention in the 1990s and early 2000s, most

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notably through debates over questions of truth and representation, there has been far less attention to its potential transformations for the political and cultural landscape of the twenty-first century. Who are the subjects of testimonio today? What new forms can the genre take? And how can it attend to a political climate so deeply marked, on the one hand, by the mass movement of people and, on the other, by heightened resistance to it?

In what is widely considered a definitive essay on the genre of testimonio, “The Margin at the Center,” first published in 1989, John Beverley poses the following question: “Are there experiences in the world today that would be betrayed or misrepresented by the forms of literature as we know it?” (2004, 29). At the time, Beverley was referring to struggles in the 1960s-80s of “working people everywhere against exploitation,” and made the argument that the “new form in embryo” (2004, 30) of narrative known as testimonio was indeed an embodiment of contemporary tensions around power and made visible the inability of existing literary forms to account for them. Since the 1980s, through the work of critics like Beverley, Elzbieta Sklodowska, Georg Gugelberger, Doris Sommer, George Yúdice, and others, the genre of testimonio became well defined, with a clearly identified history that anchored its origins in Miguel Barnet’s *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1967) and the 1970 inauguration of an annual testimonio prize by Cuba’s Casa de las Americas (Gugelberger 1996). In the process, a generally accepted set of conventions were assigned to the genre: the novel-length format, the first-person narration by a protagonist or witness to events of political or social significance, a metonymic quality whereby the individual story is representative of a broader collective experience, the collaboration between a subaltern subject and a politically committed intellectual, and the more or less overt objective of raising the audience’s awareness to inspire action for social justice. But if we revisit Beverley’s initial question about the adequacy of existing forms of literature to represent experiences in the world *today*, nearly fifty years after the genre’s institutionalization through the Casa de las América prize, we need to include testimonio as one of those “existing forms of literature as we know it” (Beverley 2004, 29), and ask how testimonio today might be different.

This is the question historian Florencia Mallon takes up in her 2002 testimonio project—*When a Flower is Reborn*—with Mapuche feminist activist Rosa Isolde Reuque Paillalef. In her “Editor’s Introduction,” she asks, “Can we find new ways to narrate and analyze the problems that remain when the war or dictatorship is over, problems that may appear less dramatic yet are not less painful or intractable, such as poverty,

subordination, political exclusion, malnutrition, cultural discrimination?” (Mallon 2002, 29). Situating it between testimonio and ethnography, Mallon presents her project with Reuque Paillalef as opening “new and deeper narrative forms in our continuing search for ways to tell the stories of ordinary human beings” (Mallon 2002, 30). The result of their collaboration is a hybrid text that combines the more conventional testimonio-style edited first-person narratives based on transcribed interviews with dialogues between the two women, as well as significant inclusion of what Mallon calls the “family chorus” (Mallon 2002, 16), where Reuque Paillalef’s relatives offer their own perspectives, at some points complementing and at other points providing counterpoints for the main protagonist’s narrative. What results is “more an imitation of theater than of the novel form” (Mallon 2002, 19), representing a kind of dramatic performance through the interaction between characters. In this way, Mallon and Reuque Paillalef depart from the conventional single narrator of testimonio, as well as from the presumption that the story of an individual could be “representative” of any group, or what would otherwise be described as the metonymic quality of testimonio. Mallon insists that what she sought in her collaboration with Reuque Paillalef was an interactive dialogue and reflection “about the political and cultural complexities of her people and her culture” (Mallon 2002, 1). I choose to dedicate some discussion here to *When a Flower is Reborn* because it represents an early effort at the turn of the twenty-first century to grapple with the question of what testimonio can be and do in a political and cultural climate quite distinct from that of the 1960s-80s. And because, as a collaborative project by a historian and an activist that bridges ethnography, literature, oral history, and drama, it gestures towards the kind of undisciplining of testimonio that the works I will be discussing make evident. Mallon and Reuque Paillalef’s early example inspires my riff on Beverley’s 1989 question: what are the experiences today that would be betrayed or misrepresented by the forms of *testimonio* as we know it? And what are the new forms of testimonio that emerge to represent and accompany such experiences?

Testimonio & Border Crossing

My interest in this essay is to consider what testimonio might look like in the representation of a very particular experience, border-crossing between the US and Mexico in the twenty-first century. In particular, I am interested in representations of the new subjects of immigration: women, minors, families, LGBTQ individuals, indigenous peoples, not only or even primarily from Mexico. My focus is not on the

broader experience of immigration or of life as an immigrant in the United States, but rather the specific process of crossing the border. In examining the forms of literature that attempt to represent this experience, attention must go beyond merely the textual content to consider the ways that texts come to exist and circulate in the world (their form and their processes of production and circulation). In doing so, I reconsider Gayatri Spivak's classic question, which inspired many debates about testimonio, to ask: can the subaltern subject of undocumented border-crossing in the twenty-first century speak? And, as Spivak's question really asks, can it speak in a way we can hear it? What I propose in this essay is that perhaps yes, but only if we develop undisciplined forms of reading that can take us to other forms and other circuits of representation.

Just as the political and social circumstances shifted in South and Central America in the post-dictatorship and post-war years, demanding a different approach to testimonial representation, in North America the turn of the century was marked by a shift in the politics and realities of immigration across the US-Mexico border. While undocumented border-crossing is certainly not a phenomenon specific to the twenty-first century, beginning in the 1990s, government and civilian responses became extremely heightened through a combination of nativist rhetoric, militarization, and criminalization, creating increasingly deadly conditions for migrants (De León 2015, 39). In this context, a key rhetorical and practical strategy of conservative anti-immigrant sectors has been the dehumanization of immigrants, and in particular of undocumented border-crossers. In response, as Marta Caminero-Santangelo shows in *Documenting the Undocumented: Latino/a Narratives and Social Justice in the Era of Operation Gatekeeper*, there was a "flurry of literary production about unauthorized immigration in late 1990s and early 2000s" (2016, 7), that included a variety of literary forms: narrative journalism, fiction, collections of narratives, and memoirs and oral histories. Caminero-Santangelo recognizes that many of these reflect "an adaptation of the Latin American literary mode of testimonio" (2016, 23) with their use of first-person narratives to launch calls to action, as well as their insistence that "what is at stake is the ethics of telling and receiving these stories" (2016, 24) and "a pressing sense that the situation calls for an ethical and communal response" (2016, 23). They emerge from an urgency to counter the dehumanizing effects of, on the one hand, the nativist rhetoric about immigration and, on the other hand, the predominance of supposedly "objective" data and statistics in discourse around immigration (Henry 2017, 110; Le Bot 2010, 6), all of which serve to further criminalize immigration and justify militarization of the border.

Immigrant testimonio “foregrounds humanized historical memory” (Henry 2017, 114) by opening a discursive space where previously unheard perspectives and experiences might be expressed. Caminero-Santangelo’s study provides an overview of how testimonio has been mobilized to intervene in the rhetoric and public debate about undocumented immigration in the twenty-first century. She, and others, have rightfully insisted on the urgent need to listen to those living the experience of undocumented immigration (Caminero-Santangelo 2016; Henry 2017; Cleaveland and Kirsch 2019; Orner 2008). In the introduction to *Underground America: Narratives of Undocumented Lives*, editor Peter Orner notes that we hear a lot *about* undocumented immigrants, and follows by asking a key question: “but how often do we hear *from* them?” (2008, 7). Along the same lines, but in different terms, in the foreword, Luis Alberto Urrea (author of *The Devil’s Highway*, the Pulitzer Prize finalist bestselling true story of one group’s attempt to cross the border through the deadly terrain of the Sonora desert), asserts “But nobody asks them what they think. Nobody stops and simply asks” (2008, 1). Orner’s edited collection of testimonios represents one attempt to do that: to hear the lived experience of undocumented immigrants. The book compiles over two dozen testimonios based on interviews, and includes mostly voices of immigrants from Mexico, but also Guatemala, El Salvador, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Iran, South Africa, and China. An earlier, but similar collection that Caminero-Santangelo also examines as an example of the adaptation of testimonio for immigrant narratives in the twenty-first century is *La migra me hizo los mandados*, edited by Alicia Alarcón and published in both Spanish and English by Arte Público Press in Houston in 2002. A key difference between the two collections is that whereas Orner’s is directed primarily at an audience that is not the community of those giving their testimonios, Alarcón’s collection can be read as having a dual audience, being both “inwardly” and “outwardly” directed (Caminero-Santangelo 2016, 160). Nevertheless, Caminero-Santangelo convincingly signals some of the limitations of these, and similar projects, noting the potential depoliticization that can result from formal and editorial decisions. These include the fragmentation of testimonial narratives, the heavy mediation and editing of the texts, the lack of contextualization, and the combination of large numbers of short, individual stories. But what these collections do make evident is the urgency of hearing directly from undocumented immigrants, and the significance of lived experience for the examination and understanding of the recent history and present moment of immigration politics. As Brittany Henry argues in her deep reading of Alarcón’s project, “While quantitative analysis of the structural conditions that propel immigration is

useful and even necessary to combat misconceptions about migrants, structural analyses that stop short of representing the lived experience of the men and women who cross the border abstract the features of embodied history that testimonio offers” (Henry 2017, 114). Projects like those developed by Orner and Alarcón respond to this need, though remain somewhat limited as they continue to rely on familiar and existing approaches to narrative form and content for the construction and presentation of testimonial narratives.

A more recent transborder project offers evidence of the inadequacy of existing forms to represent the experiences of border-crossing in the twenty-first century. The digital storytelling project, *Humanizing Deportation*, which began in 2017, employs new tools and strategies “to produce a public archive that will give a human face to the deportation crisis” (Humanizing Deportation). The project represents the complexity of undocumented border-crossing in the twenty-first century through its focus not only on immigration, but, significantly, on deportation. It also responds to the ever-shifting climate as a living archive that has steadily grown over the past two years and, as of July 2019, includes over 180 testimonios. The testimonios take the form of short videos (mostly two to eight minutes in length), that are produced through a collaboration between “community storytellers” (those giving their testimonio) and members of the research team, mostly professors and graduate students from universities in California, Tijuana, Guadalajara, Mexico City, Monterrey, and Ciudad Juárez. The chosen medium is “digital storytelling, a digital genre that puts control of content and production in the hands of community storytellers” (Humanizing Deportation). Like other testimonio projects, through the use of first-person narratives the project “rescata y preserva la voz de las personas afectadas” (Calvillo Vazquez and Hernández Orozco 2018, 86). And with its minimal mediation, it represents an effort to restore authorship and authority to those giving their testimonios. In doing so, as Calvillo Vazquez and Hernández Orozco argue, those who benefit most from the project are not the members of an outside audience, but rather the storytellers themselves (2018, 105). This has an effect of humanizing the experiences and subjects of immigration and deportation, not only for those receiving the stories, but also for those living it. This is achieved through a conscious and strategic disruption of both research and reception hierarchies, which pervade even in the most politically nuanced approaches to testimonio (Lizarazo et al 2017; Calvillo Vazquez and Hernández Orozco 2018). That the *Humanizing Deportation* project emerges from an interdisciplinary

collaboration between scholars on both sides of the border is significant, as is the engagement of many of those involved in the field of cultural studies.

Pedagogies of Border-Crossing

As Eduardo Restrepo explains in his essay on cultural studies in Latin America, the transdisciplinary field works from an understanding of culture-as-power and power-as-culture (2014, 3). Restrepo draws on Stuart Hall's definition of culture as "experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined" (Hall 2016, 33), and this definition relates to why cultural studies has been such a vital scholarly space for the reception and analysis of testimonio, as the genre directly connects questions of power, culture, and experience. A key consideration that Restrepo, as well as many other cultural studies scholars in Latin America, makes is the distinction between cultural studies "from" versus "about" Latin America, a distinction made while also recognizing the risks of homogenizing the complexity of the vast region (Restrepo 2014, 7). This points to the need for representations "desde adentro," and a critical stance towards mediation from the North or from institutional or scholarly actors. As a transborder project that departs from the conventions of representation in testimonio, the *Humanizing Deportation* project represents an attempt to work from an "adentro" that is also what Marisa Belausteguigoitia calls a "cruce" (2009, 107). This means that the project aims to create a space for those experiencing deportation to document and reflect on their own lived experiences ("desde adentro"), while doing so through a process of multiple "cruces": border crossing, collaboration across hierarchies, and representation across media forms. *Humanizing Deportation*, in this sense, can be read as what Restrepo delineates as the radical potential of cultural studies in Latin America: an undisciplined practice of non-reductionist thinking (2014, 3) and of "thinking without guarantees" (2014, 4), another idea he borrows from Stuart Hall. This non-reductionist thinking is not only radical because of its potential to produce knowledge about the complexity of social life, but because of the "abierta voluntad política" of cultural studies which seeks to interpret the world to transform it (Restrepo 2014, 4).

What I am interested in exploring further is how representation of the experience of border-crossing in the twenty-first century demands this kind of openly politicized, undisciplined practice precisely because of its implicit problematization of the very question of *where* knowledge is produced and its implicit challenge to power, as represented by borders of all kinds. Belausteguigoitia describes cultural studies as a pedagogy "del cruce, del desborde, y de la transgresión" and explains that "esto quiere

decir que lo que da lugar a estos estudios es, sobre todo, una nueva forma de administración y producción del conocimiento, cuya operación esencial es el cruce de fronteras disciplinarias y geoculturales. Lo que finca el carácter alternativo de estos estudios es la producción de una pedagogía política del disenso hacia fuentes hegemónicas de provisión de sentido disciplinario” (2009, 106). So, what does an undisciplined text look like? What are undisciplined reading practices?

If testimonio in its inception was conceived of as an undisciplined approach to the history of the present, we can see its influence and transformation in a now canonical work like Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. First published in 1987, it was only in 2015 that it was made available to Spanish-speaking readers through the publication in Mexico of its first translation by Norma Cantú (a second translation by Carmen Valle was published in Spain in 2016). In her introduction to the Mexican edition, Belausteguigoitia describes this “texto híbrido” (2015, 19) as “un texto en fuga” (2015, 35). These descriptors, particularly the latter, resonate with my own reading of *Borderlands* as an experimental text that is heavily inflected with testimonial qualities, and that is undisciplined in several senses. In the case of Anzaldúa we can see this in the multiple ways that her “border thinking” is practiced: the plural linguistic character, the multi-genre formal composition, the critical theorization of writing and language, and even in the book’s production and circulation processes. Undisciplined texts are texts “en fuga,” or in flight, that break away from and indeed actively flee from the conventions of writing and knowledge production. As products and processes of “pedagogías de cruce,” as Belausteguigoitia calls them, they are also part of a “pedagogía del disenso” (2009, 106), in terms of the affront they present to disciplinary borders and boundaries. Belausteguigoitia describes these pedagogies as linked to a political-intellectual trajectory that connects cultural studies and feminist theory, and which asserts: “una necesidad de teorizar desde el cuerpo, ‘encarnar’ la teoría a partir de las experiencias y desde las transacciones que es necesario llevar a cabo—en el feminismo y los estudios de género—para poder entendernos y construir puentes entre diferentes campos, sujetos, y saberes” (2015, 25). Belausteguigoitia’s emphasis on embodied theory and lived experience as foundations of pedagogies of crossing and dissent, combined with Restrepo’s understanding of culture-as-power and culture-as-experience, provide the framework for my undisciplined reading of an undisciplined text, through which we encounter a very particular experience of a border-crossing in the twenty-first century: the story of a Oaxacan woman who traverses the Sonora desert and lives to write her own testimonio.

Sentada frente a la muerte en el silencio del desierto

In what follows, I examine a project that is, on the surface, a more conventional literary work than the *Humanizing Deportation* archive, or even Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, but that also suggests the need for forms beyond "literature as we know it" to represent the experiences of border-crossers today. I return to the testimonio with which I opened this essay, *Sentada frente a la muerte en el silencio del desierto* by Alma Murrieta, a small print book published by a collectively run press in Oaxaca in 2010. Because this book is now nearly ten years old and tells the story of a woman's border-crossing a few years earlier, it certainly represents a different moment of undocumented immigration than that which we are witnessing today. Nevertheless, it remains relevant and, indeed, urgent, as the conditions in the US-Mexico borderlands today have only become more deadly and demand ongoing attention to the question of how we listen to and learn with those who arrive there daily. In the prologue, Yvon Le Bot signals the significance of the very particular testimonio that appears in *Sentada frente a la muerte*, in a statement that unfortunately still holds true a decade later. Referring to the experience of migrants, Le Bot writes "son raros los casos que la cuentan desde adentro y son obra de los mismos migrantes. Este es nuestro caso, aunque la autora se oculta detrás de un seudónimo y en un desdoblamiento en la narradora y el personaje de Esmeralda" (2010, 6). What Le Bot refers to here is the experimental presentation of the testimonial subject of *Sentada frente a la muerte*: the testimonio that recounts the lived experience of a real person is attributed to an author who uses a pseudonym, Alma Murrieta, and is narrated in the third person through the story of the protagonist, Esmeralda Bilase, also known as Yeye. This crossing of perspectives and voices is a point to which I will return later. Esmeralda Bilase is at once representative of and distinct from the new subjects of border-crossing in the twenty-first century. She is a single woman, in her late thirties, who travels by land to the border from Oaxaca. She writes her own testimonio, without the participation of a co-author or editor, and publishes it through a collaboration with a grassroots political-intellectual collective in her home state. Like other projects dedicated to the production of narratives about border crossing that seek to challenge the general lack of attention to undocumented immigrant voices (narratives "desde adentro"), *Sentada* breaks with the conventions and especially the power dynamics of testimonio in several ways, suggesting the urgency of both creating and reading differently the experiences of immigrants crossing the US-Mexico border in the twenty-first century to humanize the experience and its agents. As an experimental text and an undisciplined literary object, *Sentada frente a la muerte* presents multiple border-crossing

pedagogies, destabilizing the conventions of testimonio while enacting a praxis of solidarity with potential future migrants. The project—which goes beyond its textual content—represents both territorial border-crossing and epistemological border-crossing, as it destabilizes boundaries and disrupts borders, while clearly documenting the very concrete and material dimensions of how the US-Mexico border unevenly impacts different bodies. In my analysis of *Sentada*, I examine three aspects of the book as a project of solidarity to consider the ways its border-crossing pedagogies reflect an undisciplining of testimonio: the representation of the author/narrator's positionality, the expression of the book's objectives, and the process of its production as a cultural-political object.

Positionality and Solidarity

Sentada frente a la muerte extends the tradition of women's voices being foregrounded in Latin American testimonio. Like the testimonios of earlier periods, it draws on the experience of a subject of multiple forms of marginalization to reflect on a political crisis and activate a collective response. In the case of *Sentada*, the subject of the testimonio—a single woman in her late thirties traveling alone—represents a less visible subjectivity than that typically recognized in narratives of border-crossing. Not only does Esmeralda's identity set her apart in the broader context of migrant narratives, but it does so explicitly in her experience as part of a group being led by a coyote through the desert. As Le Bot notes in the prologue, Esmeralda is the only woman in a group of twelve adult men, but she also stands out as “la más determinada y la más reflexiva,” and because “sabe afirmar su autonomía de cara al machismo de sus acompañantes” (2010, 7-8), a quality that gains her the attention and trust of the coyote who repeatedly consults with her in moments of doubt along the journey.

The way that Esmeralda presents herself, both in the text and to her fellow border-crossers, establishes *Sentada* as an overtly feminist testimonio. It presents the experience of a single woman migrant affirming her autonomy in the face of sexism. But significantly, it also clearly asserts the embodied and material dimensions of an experience that is often rendered abstract through its invisibilization by lack of direct representation. As discussed in the introduction, the lack of first-person narratives, “desde adentro,” about border-crossing, and especially of those subjectivities that inhabit the margins of the rhetoric about immigration, leads to a focus on the supposedly “objective” dimensions, as represented through statistics and distanced representations, which in turn produces an abstraction that directly serves to

dehumanize the subjects and experiences of immigration. The direct account that appears in *Sentada* challenges this power of abstraction, which is so dominant in border and immigration politics, while also demonstrating very clearly the uneven effects of the border on different bodies. In this way, as Brittany Henry notes in her analysis of the testimonios in Alicia Alarcón's collection, "the emphasis on embodied experience in immigrant testimonio affirms the personhood of the speaking subject and combats the abstraction entailed in the focus on 'legality' or 'documentation'" (2017, 119). *Sentada*, with its particular focus on the gendered experience of border-crossing, continues in the tradition of embodied theory that is a hallmark of women of color and third world feminisms, a shared intellectual history that Belausteguigoitia describes as connecting not only Anzaldúa and theorists such as Audre Lorde and Angela Davis, but also contemporary revolutionary figures, as she asserts in her connection to the Zapatista Comandanta Esther (2015, 27). Esther's groundbreaking 2001 speech to the Mexican Congress activated "el poder de la escritura autobiográfica" as part of a kind of "pedagogía, de esta administración particular de la escritura, de la intimidad del dolor y la vergüenza de la discriminación" (Belausteguigoitia 2015, 27). Esmeralda's testimonio in *Sentada*, while a much less public act of writing, similarly develops a kind of undisciplined pedagogy through which the written word becomes in itself a kind of border-crossing pedagogy as it connects the corporeal experience with a conceptual practice.

Through the story of Esmeralda, Murrieta presents analysis of the embodied experience of being the sole woman in a group of a dozen border-crossers and in this way, presents a much-needed view of the effects of border crossing on feminized bodies. In particular, she describes the ways that the difference that her body—and its lack of attachment to a man—represented in the desert subjected her to a near constant threat of harassment and assault that her fellow travelers were not. This appears, unsurprisingly, in the ways her body is targeted by a group of "bajadores" or "asaltantes" who attack and rob migrants crossing the desert. During one attack on Esmeralda's group, her body is subjected to a search for items of value that is completely distinct from what her male counterparts face. She is forced at knifepoint to untie her hair and lower her pants, while also being groped under the pretense of a search (Murrieta 2010, 49). In the aftermath, José, one of the other migrants, helps her to gather her belongings now scattered on the ground. Esmeralda, amidst her rage, described as a "mar de coraje e impotencia" (Murrieta 2010, 50), recognizes and acknowledges her gratitude for his small act of solidarity. It is only following this attack

that other members of the group realize that she is traveling alone, a fact that stuns them, despite the fact that they are all, also, traveling alone. The shock comes entirely from the common understanding that women face heightened threats—including the threat of rape and sexual assault—along the perilous journey across the border. Esmeralda is well aware of these threats, having heard stories of the violence that other women migrants have faced, and towards the end of the journey, even expresses surprise at her own fate in the desert: “Como de milagro, desde el punto de vista de Esmeralda, ninguno de sus compañeros de viaje en el cerro ‘le faltó al respeto’” (Murrieta 2010, 92). Throughout the text, despite the third-person narration, the reader gains what feels like direct access to Esmeralda’s thoughts and reflections through moments like this one, which provide insight into “la huella psicológica que marca a quienes cruzan la frontera” (Murrieta 2010, 93).

As I explained in my earlier presentation of the book, *Sentada frente a la muerte* is written in a unique style that departs from the conventional use of the first-person in testimonio. Le Bot describes the combination of perspectives in the prologue, while making clear that the author is in fact the protagonist, despite the construction of multiple layers of representational distance: “la autora se oculta detrás de un seudónimo y en un desdoblamiento en la narradora y el personaje de Esmeralda” (2010, 6). The book presents the testimonio of the author, whose true identity remains hidden by the use of a pseudonym. But the manipulation of perspective extends beyond that, through the use of a third-person narrator through whom we follow the actions and thoughts of Esmeralda. Despite the multiplicity of figures that appear in the pages of the book, the testimonio remains, I argue, unmediated, and what occurs with the plurality of names and voices is a strategic manipulation of perspective that allows the subject of the testimonio to exert greater control over the representation of her raw experience. In this way, while Murrieta breaks with what Beverley calls “the predominant formal aspect of testimonio” (2008, 571)—the use of the “I” voice—she succeeds in creating what he calls the “voice of a real rather than a fictional person” and the accompanying “mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, to impose itself on an institution of power and privilege from the perspective of the excluded, the marginal, the subaltern” (2008, 572). But unlike more conventional testimonios, by developing a plural narrator/protagonist and using the third, rather than first, person, Murrieta’s experimentation forces the reader to contemplate the very idea of voice, and the accompanying questions of power, distance, access, and representation.

Another fundamental convention of testimonio as defined by Beverley—its metonymic character (2008, 573)—is manipulated by Murrieta, echoing Florencia Mallon’s questioning of this presumed function of testimonio. In the first lines of the prologue, Le Bot seeks to establish the representational quality of Murrieta’s individual story: “La aventura que aquí se narra es la que viven, a través de todo el planeta, decenas de millones de personas lanzadas hacia las turbulencias de la globalización” (2010, 5). But as he goes on to insist, “Pero cada partida es también fruto de una decisión personal” (Le Bot 2010, 5). In this way, the story is at once representative of the plight of many others, and also deeply individual and particular. Murrieta plays with the metonymy: she speaks as a woman migrant to other women migrants but is also careful to identify the particularities of her own experience and positionality. On the very first page of the text, Murrieta openly acknowledges her own relative privilege as she describes her previous experience of migration to the United States, a journey made by plane, that allowed her to work for a few months among other immigrant women in a cookie factory in upstate New York. She uses this anecdote to reveal several things to the reader. First, her prior experience of working as an immigrant in the United States. Second, her access to a visa and air travel for that prior journey. Third, her unwillingness during that time to reveal to her fellow co-workers the ease with which she had crossed the border, knowing that they had likely suffered much greater hardships in their trek to that factory in the north. She describes that experience, and in doing so, establishes the dramatic transformation that occurred between that moment and the moment from which she writes her testimonio: “las mujeres la interrogaban seguido: ‘¿Y qué tal la pasada?’. En aquella ocasión, su llegada *al norte* había sido sin problemas, pero se sentía mal de explicar a las demás que ese viaje lo había hecho durante un vuelo de siete horas, por lo que invariablement contestaba: ‘igual que todos.’ En aquellos momentos no tenía idea de lo arriesgado que era ‘pasar por el cerro’ pero esta vez sería muy diferente” (Murrieta 2010, 11). In this opening, Esmeralda introduces herself to the reader, situating the particularities of her experience and position as a migrant, while also providing an initial indication of her motivations for telling her story: to help other women know about the risks and dangers of crossing the desert. Unlike other women who have survived the border-crossing journey, Murrieta has the possibility of writing—and publishing—her own story, and she does so by employing an experimental multiplication of the roles of author/narrator/protagonist. In doing so, she asserts her agency as an organic intellectual as she deploys a unique strategy for developing a sort of “mediation” that affords some protection through distancing,

without actually involving a collaborator. In this way she transgresses the conventions of testimonio, because she does not rely on a traditional intellectual for the transmission and dissemination of her story. The testimonio here is not the product of a relation of solidarity between a traditional intellectual and an organic intellectual. Rather, solidarity is enacted distinctly in this project, as Murrieta seeks to mobilize her own relative privilege to communicate with and support other people—especially women—contemplating the decision to cross the desert.

Lateral Solidarity in Testimonio

Historically, testimonio has been a genre of writing addressed to an audience that is distinct from the speaker's own community. By speaking to an outside audience, testimonio seeks to raise awareness, inspire action, and create a network of solidarity with those affected by the events and circumstances described in the testimonio. The collaborating editor or co-author is the conduit between the speaker's community and that outside audience, connecting the affected community with a community of politically engaged intellectuals and activists, typically imagined to reside in the global north or in the major metropolises of the south. As such, testimonio has historically relied on the formation of a relation—imagined or real—between a marginalized collective subject and a more privileged audience, and in this way replicates the power dynamics of more conventional solidarity models. Certainly, solidarity always implies a sort of border-crossing logic, through the transgression of a presumed social and/or geographic division in the interest of mobilizing for change. Too often has that uncritically reproduced the kinds of hierarchies (geopolitical, epistemological, etc.) that the radical pedagogies of cultural studies and feminist studies seek to directly challenge and dismantle.

In contrast, *Sentada frente a la muerte* deploys a different mode of solidarity, what could be described as lateral solidarity, as it is not aimed at an “outside” audience, be it of privileged readers in the United States or simply of those apparently detached from the experience of migration. *Sentada frente a la muerte* is a testimonio that seeks to communicate with other potential migrants considering not just making the journey to the United States, but specifically those considering crossing the border through the desert. As with any text, the imagined or desired reader is just that; there is no assurance that the pages will reach that audience. And while I will dedicate some discussion in the next section to the particularities of how the production and distribution process may or may not facilitate this, what concerns me here is the way that the author expresses

those objectives in the text itself, making evident who she is writing for. In *Can Literature Promote Justice?* Kimberly Nance describes testimonio as a “pedagogy of the unoppressed” (2006, 49), playing with Paulo Freire’s concept, to describe the relatively privileged reader typically imagined for the genre. I argue that *Sentada frente a la muerte* departs from this, and offers, rather, a pedagogy of (by and for) the oppressed. *Sentada* is not unique in doing so. *Humanizing Deportation* certainly develops this kind of inwardly directed pedagogy, as Calvillo Vazquez and Hernández Orozco (2018) argue in their analysis of the project. And to a lesser extent, even Alicia Alarcón’s collection *La migrante hizo los mandados* could be said to do so, as Caminero-Santangelo (2016, 160) suggests with her description of the book’s dual audience, as a project both “inwardly” and “outwardly” directed. In *Sentada*, Murrieta quite literally offers a pedagogy of the oppressed, as she mobilizes her own experience to inform and indeed teach others about the risks associated with crossing the border through the desert as she did.

As an active form of literature with explicit political objectives, Beverley insists that testimonio makes demands of the reader: “*Something* is asked of us by *testimonio*. . . In this sense, *testimonio* might be seen as a kind of speech act that sets up special ethical and epistemological demands” (2008, 574). He goes on to explain that these demands require a response, which may be passive or active, as the text leaves readers unable to ignore what they have encountered in the text. With the lateral solidarity mobilized in *Sentada*, Murrieta makes a specific demand of her imagined readers: she wants potential future border-crossers to understand the risks they are taking if they attempt to cross the desert. She seeks to fill a void by offering the kind of information and understanding she lacked before her own journey, and feels obligated to do so because, “a diferencia de miles de personas que murieron es su intento por cruzar la frontera, Esmeralda Bilase sobrevivió para contarles esta historia” (Murrieta 2010, 17). The testimonio is the result of a sense of obligation to mobilize her privilege—of having survived and of being able to tell her story—in solidarity with other potential migrants. And the choice to tell her story is described as a political decision: “Yeye bien pudo guardar silencio y esconder en su memoria este relato sobre una experiencia que a veces resulta penosa y hasta humillante pero que decidió hacer pública para que otras mujeres—al igual que los hombres y sus familias—puedan saber a qué se arriesgan cuando deciden irse al norte ‘con coyote’” (Murrieta 2010, 17-18).

Before being dropped off in Sásabe to begin the trek by foot through the desert, Esmeralda’s group encounters a checkpoint set up by Mexican migration officials, with a large sign: “El anuncio tenía un mensaje de la Comisión Nacional de

Derechos Humanos que advertía a los inmigrantes sobre las condiciones adversas del desierto y—por si acaso alguno de los humanos que pasaba por ahí no lo sabía—les recordaba de la importancia de conservar la vida” (Murrieta 2010, 32). In the exchange that ensues, the migration officials record the names and places of origins of each of the migrants, before interrogating them about what they know about the journey that lies ahead of them. When Esmeralda replies that they’ve been told they’ll be walking for seven hours, the agent responds aggressively, yelling “¡Muchacha estúpida!”, and informs her the journey will take “tres días y tres noches,” and that they run the risk of encountering assailants in the desert (Murrieta 2010, 33). Esmeralda reacts with a sense of fear and impotence, at not having had this kind of information before making the decision to come to the desert: “Esmeralda no tenía ni la mínima idea de lo que le esperaba adelante” (Murrieta 2010, 34).

But her desire to offer her story to help inform future migrants comes not only from her own experience of feeling terribly uninformed and unprepared. It also comes from her reflections on what she describes as the absurdity of the Mexican government’s presence and the hypocrisy of the official messaging, with its paternalistic reminder of the value of life, to those considering the trek across the desert as a last resort decision made by “quienes diariamente son empujados por el hambre y ‘la necesidad’ a salir del territorio nacional en busca de sobrevivencia” (Murrieta 2010, 34). Esmeralda’s is, in many senses, the kind of “deliberative testimonio,” that Nance defines as driven by a desire to affect decisions regarding the future and personal action (2006, 30-31), and which can include narratives directed at the speaker’s own community (2006, 36). In contrast to the empty messaging of the Mexican government, with its claims of defending human rights, Esmeralda’s testimonio is inflected by a humility—a characteristic Nance associates with deliberative testimonio—that emerges from a recognition of the limitations of the information she can provide. At the closing of the book, Murrieta writes “Yeye sólo podía dar cuenta de lo que ella vivió” (2010, 121). Nevertheless, she insists on the urgency of telling her story, as limited as it may be, because of its potential to provide for others what she lacked before she found herself in the desert. Like other deliberative testimonios, *Sentada* no doubt seeks to inspire action for social justice. But what is that justice for *Sentada*? I argue that for Murrieta/Esmeralda, justice is entirely connected to knowledge. She sees her testimonio as a political intervention in its efforts to provide more information about border-crossing, greater access to migrant voices, and greater agency for those who have lived the experience to communicate and share their knowledge. The border-

crossing pedagogy of Esmeralda's testimonio centers the voice of a woman migrant and activates an ethic of lateral solidarity, through a carefully crafted combination of narrative and analysis that yields a rich theorization of personal experience and embodied knowledge.

A distinguishing aspect of the experimental character of *Sentada frente a la muerte* is the layering of the more straightforward narration of her journey from Oaxaca to Los Angeles with moments of critical analysis and personal reflection through which Esmeralda's individual experience is situated in a broader context. Throughout the narrative, Esmeralda's experiences provide detailed insight for future migrants about what they might encounter crossing the desert with a coyote: the harsh conditions of the desert, the reality of the distance and terrain being traversed, the complexity of the webs of actors involved (fellow migrants, *la migra*, coyotes, assailants, cartels, security houses), and the haunting presence of death everywhere. The narrative is thick with descriptions of the interactions and sensations that mark the journey. And the text takes on a particularly poetic quality in the moments where Esmeralda pauses to take in the desert, through reflections that vary tremendously. Initially, Esmeralda is struck with awe at the scale and the beauty of the landscape: "el desierto resultaba impresionante, las figuras de los cerros parecían seres solitarios perdidos en el espacio-tiempo" (Murrieta 2010, 20). But quickly, that beauty is contrasted with a different impression of the desert as a space of death: "Desde el camino se veían varias cruces que marcaban el lugar donde habían fallecido algunas personas. . . 'este desierto está cabrón', pensó" (Murrieta 2010, 31). As the group advances through the desert, and their hunger, exhaustion, dehydration, and sense of vulnerability grows, Esmeralda begins to experience the desert as a timeless space. The narrator, clearly expressing Esmeralda's visceral experience, comments: "En el desierto no existía pasado ni futuro, ahí cada paso se afirma en tiempo presente" (Murrieta 2010, 58), and this idea is repeated several times over the pages that follow. The impact of the landscape on Esmeralda takes shape in the poem she pens hastily one night. Just before the verses appear, the narrator describes the urgency Esmeralda felt in writing these words as she sat in the desert, feeling a sense of mutual contemplation between herself and the presence of "un silencio. . . ancestral, muy antiguo y absoluto" (Murrieta 2010, 87). The poem, as well as the interspersed moments of more abstract reflection, not only inflect the text with a poetic elegance, they also provide insights to the visceral experience of being a woman, alone, making the journey through the desert to cross the border. With this, Murrieta asserts the value of this embodied knowledge for the reader, as it is placed in

a symmetrical relationship to the more technical and descriptive information that Esmeralda documents.

Alongside the poetic reflections on the desert space and the detailed narration of the process and reality of the journey appear moments of critical analysis of the significance of the border and the current state of immigration politics. Early in the text, Esmeralda is confronted with the border wall in Tijuana, which she describes as the “muro que divide el país de la modernidad y la tecnología, el lugar del empleo y la explotación civilizada” (Murrieta 2010, 13). A few pages later, Murrieta dedicates an entire subheaded section to “El muro,” momentarily jarring the reader as the prose shifts to a detailed description—and critique—of the history and policies in place for the expansion of the wall under U.S. President George W. Bush, as well as of the magnitude of “la frontera que separa a México del país más poderoso del mundo” (Murrieta 2010, 16). While recognizing and commenting on the significance of the efforts to control and militarize this politically constructed division, Murrieta also, at various points, makes clear the ways that the border is not just in one place, but rather is experienced as multiple to those crossing. Esmeralda is described as crossing at least twenty fences and barriers, with the one marking the actual US-Mexico border being nearly indistinguishable from the others. But she also experiences the multiplicity of the border at each point at which the group is detained along the way: by the Mexican migration officials, by the *coyotes*, by the assailants in the desert, and finally by those controlling the multiple “casas de seguridad,” where the group is held for several days and forced to produce greater amounts of money than they had been promised. Murrieta dedicates the last part of the book to describing the “casas de seguridad,” as they are an aspect of the journey about which Esmeralda was uninformed and unprepared. It is in this space of confinement and human trafficking where her difference as the sole woman in her group is perhaps most acutely felt, through the threat of sexual assault and the expectation of domestic labor. This is a part of the process that Esmeralda feels especially compelled to inform potential future migrant women of—the part that comes after the border, it seems, has been crossed.

As Le Bot comments in the prologue, Esmeralda’s testimonio tells the story of the multiple stages of border crossing, that begin and end far from the actual line that purports to divide the north from the south. And what follows after the end of the book is the next stage of trying to find work in a “‘sociedad de acogida’ poco acogedora” (Le Bot 2010, 10). The book ends with Esmeralda finally being released from the last “casa de seguridad,” as she joins others headed to southern California: “Así se perdió

Esmeralda, en busca de la sobrevivencia, lo cual seguramente sería otra hazaña” (Murrieta 2010, 121). What happens once she arrives in that “sociedad de acogida” is the story that goes untold. This gives Esmeralda’s testimonio the quality of being an “open work” (Beverly 2008, 573), with no resolution or conclusion offered. And in ending the story here, Murrieta reasserts the objectives of the testimonio’s border-crossing pedagogy.

Sentada frente a la muerte as Process and Product

As with other migrant testimonio projects that depart from the conventions of the genre, the border-crossing pedagogies of *Sentada frente a la muerte* are evident not only in the textual content of the book, but also in its form as a material object, and its trajectory as a cultural-political process and product. In particular, the book’s publication and circulation represent a kind of *fuga* or flight from the conventions of publishing, even in a genre like testimonio which has often moved through circuits of independent presses. *Sentada frente a la muerte* was one of the first books published by Pez en el Árbol, a small press based in Oaxaca. It is unusual for a testimonio to be published in the speaker’s home location, rather than in that of the intended audience. And even in cases of immigrant testimonios, the texts are generally published in the speaker’s destination, rather than their place of origin. That *Sentada frente a la muerte* was published in Oaxaca, and not the United States, is relevant to understanding its transgressive qualities. And the story of its publisher reveals a great deal about the significance of this book’s form as not only an experimental text, but a radical material object. Founded in 2010, the press, described as a “colectivo editorial,” has (as of 2018) published over a dozen titles that include works dedicated to questions of feminism, gender and sexuality, popular resistance, and indigenous movements, almost exclusively penned by Latin American authors. Many of the titles are published as small, pocket-sized books, and all are produced using low-cost techniques and materials to ensure their accessibility and low pricetags. As one editor remarked in an interview, the goal is to produce books “barato, barato, barato, para así poder venderlos barato. Así funciona” (Interview, Mexico City 2010). The project took inspiration from the collective members’ prior experiences with radical publishing, and while the three founding members are all from Mexico, two had lived and worked extensively in Bolivia, bringing to the Oaxaca project insights from their experiences with militant publishing there.

As they explain in their catalog materials, the name and logo of the press are drawn from a curious animal, the Almirante de Manglar. This fish, which is native to the Americas, has the physical capacity to flee from the water if necessary in order to survive and the ability to reproduce itself. This animal embodies border-crossing in multiple ways—its defiance of conventional notions of sex, its transgression of the physical habitat assigned to its species, and its extreme capacity for autonomy and adaptation. In taking “nuestro nombre y nuestro modo de acción” from this spectacular creature, the press situates itself as a kind of fugitive project, with a praxis of flight and transgression. As they explain, they operate in a way that resonates with the “modo de acción” of the Almirante de Manglar, with its ability to flee the water to temporarily escape and take refuge from hostile conditions:

cada libro nos significa un modo de enfrentar el contexto convulso de estos tiempos caracterizado por la violencia y el despojo. Tomamos aire con cada publicación y luego regresamos a nuestras realidades a compartirla para pensar, reflexionar, accionar y seguir andando con otr@s que como nosotr@s creen firmemente que otro modo ser y estar en este mundo es posible y que nos toca construirlo. El Almirante de Manglar es un pez que se reproduce a sí mismo. En ese sentido, nosotros somos un colectivo autogestivo, por ello, la venta de cada libro nos permite reproducir otro. Es decir, no vendemos nuestros libros porque creamos en el lucro sino porque es lo que nos permite colocar nuevas ideas a partir de la impresión de un nuevo material. (Pez en el Árbol)

Like the Almirante de Manglar’s habitat, the rhizomatic mangrove swamps of the Americas, Pez en el Árbol exists within—and indeed actively works to create—a web of radical and decentralized networks of writers, movements, presses, booksellers, and readers. The organizing ethic and economic logic of the projects and processes alongside which Pez en el Árbol works is based on autonomy, *autogestión*, and solidarity. And the press conceives of its publishing work as part of a daily praxis of militancy and collective struggle: “somos un colectivo militante, es decir, además de la publicación de libros creemos en que es importante traducir nuestros textos en una práctica cotidiana. Esa es nuestra lucha diaria” (Pez en el Árbol).

The Pez en el Árbol catalog is a map of networks of solidarity and militancy, of “relaciones de confianza no de mercado” (Pez en el Árbol), which includes not only the authors they publish, but also other presses, across the Americas and beyond, with whom they collaborate. This includes a distribution project called La Cooperacha, a project for “distribución editorial solidaria,” which is based on a collective reclaiming of the printed word: “Creemos en una palabra que vuela, que camina, que nada, que es traviesa, que juega, que muta, que se pone a discusión, que cambia... Creemos que es de

vital importancia apropiarnos de la palabra, tomarla y hacer uso de ella –usar la palabra y que la palabra nos use– en todas sus dimensiones, y así construir la palabra nueva” (La Cooperacha). This “palabra nueva,” that moves and changes, is the word, or culture, that is in flight—that is fleeing the confines and boundaries of the institutional, the conventional, the commercial, and the formal—not just for the sake of transgression, but in the service of the construction of a different way of being, thinking, and relating in the world. *Sentada frente a la muerte* is a text and an object that actively seeks to construct different kinds of relations, to value different kinds of knowledge, and to imagine different possibilities for living for the countless people who face the need to leave their home communities “por la necesidad” (Le Bot 2010, 6).

Conclusion

In the opening of a section entitled “Ilegales,” Murrieta writes: “Esmeralda es una mujer de opiniones. Sobre su condición de indocumentada razonaba así...” (2010, 56). Over the next four pages, Murrieta presents Esmeralda’s reflections on the political construction of the category of the “illegals,” which from the perspective of “los gobiernos” are “Criminales. Terroristas. Fugitivos. Indocumentados. Mojados. Frijoleros. *Brownies*. *Chimpas*. Ratonos. Cucarachas. Parias. . .” (Murrieta 2010, 56). To this, she juxtaposes her own view: “Desde otra perspectiva, sin embargo, podrían ser un ejército de desplazados a causa de la globalización. Exiliados económicos. Fugitivos de la represión. Trashumantes en busca de sobrevivencia” (Murrieta 2010, 57). And Esmeralda understands herself as part of that “army”: “Esmeralda estaba ahí. Era parte de la columna de personas devaluadas en su condición humana que se internó en la indefinición, en el lugar donde el espacio y tiempo no se contabilizan con relojes ni medidas de tercera dimensión sino en las posibilidades de sobrevivencia” (Murrieta 2010, 58). This devaluation of the humanity of immigrants and border-crossers is precisely what narratives “desde adentro”—like Murrieta’s book or the *Humanizing Deportation* archive—seek to counter. They challenge the dehumanizing rhetoric about immigrants not only through the direct representation of personal experience, but also through the ways the speakers of such narratives assert the authority of their embodied knowledge as relevant and necessary. By communicating not only as border-crossers but also directly to other border-crossers, the speakers of such testimonios enact a lateral solidarity through border-crossing pedagogies that work to open new knowledge practices—of speaking, writing, and reading.

In the prologue to *Sentada frente a la muerte* Le Bot insists on the continued relevance and indeed urgency of Murrieta's testimonio, alluding to the heightening of tensions around immigration in the site of Esmeralda's entry to the United States: "Después de su viaje, el estado de Arizona, como sabemos, endureció más su actitud frente a los sin papeles y devino el lugar de cristalización del asunto de la inmigración clandestina a los Estados Unidos. Lo que da aún más fuerza y actualidad a este testimonio" (Le Bot 2010, 10). Today, nearly ten years after its publication, the relevance of Murrieta's experimental pedagogies of border-crossing could not be more apparent. From the reappearance of the border wall and the threats to DACA to the brutal revival of "prevention through deterrence" through the separation of families and the caging of children, the need for new ways of listening to those experiencing this ongoing crisis first-hand has never been more urgent. While my focus here has been on a testimonio that on the surface may appear conventional, my analysis has sought to offer some glimpses into what it might look like to write, read, and listen differently, to open and sustain new pedagogies and praxes of solidarity.

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