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Review/Reseña

Kimberly Nance, *Can Literature Promote Justice?: Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006.

Politics, Rhetoric and the Future of *Testimonio*

Patrick Dove

Indiana University

Kimberly Nance's *Can Literature Promote Justice?* examines the cultural phenomenon of *testimonio* in the context of its academic reception from the 1970's through the present. Her book seeks to revitalize critical debate on the genre—which many in the field perceive as having run its course—by offering an alternative to prevailing interpretive tendencies: namely, a euphoric reception, which as early as 1970 celebrated *testimonio* as providing an occasion for solidarity across cultural, economic and geopolitical boundaries; and a mournful critical mood, which, with the end of the Cold War and the diminishment of ideological conflict in Central and South America, announces the retreat of solidarity as a political signifier as

well as the exhaustion of the promise formerly associated with this genre. In Nance's view, the celebratory reading overestimates the political potential of *testimonio*—by falsely equating verbal denunciations of domination with actual social transformation—while the mourning of *testimonio*'s demise ironically remains captive to this same imaginary, lamenting the death of an idea that in fact never managed to grasp the genre's possibilities in the first place. In Nance's view, the mourning of solidarity perpetuates an interpretive fantasy—albeit nostalgically or melancholically rather than affirmatively—and thereby blocks critical awareness of the truly emancipatory potential of the genre.

The book is divided into six chapters plus an introduction, a conclusion and an appendix. The first chapter is devoted to establishing what will be a key distinction between three rhetorical modes. Drawing on James Murphy's account of classical rhetoric (*A Synoptic History of Classical Rhetoric*, 1983), Nance distinguishes between "forensic," "epideictic" and "deliberative" discourses. Forensic discourse is a juridical form of address that petitions decision makers to judge past actions as just or unjust. Epideictic speech calls on listeners to characterize present actions as praiseworthy or blameworthy. Deliberative discourse, meanwhile, asks its audience to decide whether or not to act. Nance maintains that each of these discursive modes has played a key role in shaping critical assessments of Latin American *testimonio*. Forensic discourse lent support to hopes that the genre might provide an alternative forum for seeking redress against injustice, especially in situations where institutional channels for justice had been blocked (for instance, by repressive regimes or by weak democratic transitional regimes). By the same token, epideictic speech shapes the use of *testimonio* to denounce repressors and structures of domination, particularly in circumstances where cultures of impunity or complicity between military and civilian sectors make holding public debates over repressive practices difficult. For Nance, however, deliberative discourse offers the greatest hope for linking *testimonio* to social transformation today. It is by inciting the reader to act, rather than seeking judgment and denunciation, that *testimonio* remains open to the possibility of justice. Although the distinction between these

rhetorical modes at times seems to comprise a chronological progression—first forensic and epideictic, later deliberative—it would be more accurate to think of them as competing tendencies, more than one (or even all) of which could conceivably be present in a text from any period.

This chapter highlights one of the book's most significant contributions to the field: Nance's insistence on rhetoric as an important consideration for both academic criticism and for *testimonio* producers. *Testimonio* criticism has historically showed reluctance to explore questions of language and rhetoric, in large part due to fears that doing so would open the door for conflating *testimonio* with forms of literature whose primary concern is aesthetic experience and not the lived experiences of domination, perseverance and solidarity. Nance, on the other hand, reminds us that rhetorical strategies can and do play a fundamental role in social struggles.

Chapter Two takes issue with critical tendencies prevalent in the North American academic reception of *testimonio*, focusing on interpretations influenced by trauma theory. While Nance makes clear that *testimonio* speakers are not omniscient, self-sufficient subjects—on the contrary, they frequently express doubts, uncertainties and misgivings about their own decisions—she maintains, for reasons that will only become fully clear in the following chapter, that the “deliberative” tendency must situate the reader unambiguously as addressee. Trauma theory, on the other hand, is interested in how testimonial discourse can unsettle and displace the listener or reader as privileged addressee, highlighting what Nance calls “the impossible,” or experiences bordering on the limits of what can be remembered, understood and imagined. As an alternative to trauma theory's emphasis on “the impossible,” Nance turns to Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of “empathy” and “exotopy” as models for the deliberative exchange between *testimonialista* and reader. In Nance's words, readers must not only be able to place themselves in the other's position (a gesture trauma theory never ceases to question), they must also remain capable of “return[ing] to their own place in the world [in order to] consider the unique ways in which that position enables them to assist others” (63).

Chapter Three introduces the “just world” hypothesis developed by social psychologist Melvin Lerner. The discussion of Lerner is surprisingly brief, considering that Nance’s argument relies heavily on his ideas about justice. The hypothesis states that people are motivated by a need to see the world as an orderly, rational, just place, in which others “get what they deserve and deserve what they get.”¹ Nance draws from this the conclusion that “people do justice because they desire to believe in it” (68). A number of ambiguities are present in the appropriation of Lerner’s ideas. Although Nance acknowledges some of these uncertainties, many of the questions raised by her appropriation of Lerner have yet to be worked out in a way that would support the conclusions that she advocates. I will return to this point below.

The next two chapters (four and five) discuss some of the challenges faced by *testimonialistas* and their collaborators (frequently European or North American intellectuals). In Chapter Four, Nance argues that the “speakers” whose accounts are transcribed in *testimonio* are generally more savvy and versed in public speaking than their critics have been inclined to acknowledge. Domitila Barrios de Chungara and Rigoberta Menchú are seasoned activists and organizers whose experience, in Nance’s view, makes them less likely to find themselves at a loss for words—or stymied by an encounter with “the impossible”—when it comes to telling their stories. In drawing this distinction between “traumatized” and “non-traumatized” discourses, Nance is guilty of mischaracterizing the insights of Freud, Caruth and others concerning the nature of trauma: nowhere does either one suggest that trauma is synonymous with being unable to give testimony, nor does the notion of the impossible imply that testimony does not happen—on the contrary, it is only through testimony that we can catch an occasional glimpse of the impossible or the real. That aside, Nance’s emphasis on the fact that many *testimonialistas* are experienced speakers is valuable because it further underscores the need to take seriously the status of rhetoric in testimonial discourse. *Testimonio* criticism can only move forward, in this view, by abandoning the tendency to treat its object

¹ V. Lee Hamilton, book review of *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* by Melvin J. Lerner, *Contemporary Sociology*, 11:2 (March 1982): 236-37.

as a sacred text that remains beyond criticism, analysis or doubt. Criticism can best maintain its respect for the “other” by treating *testimonialistas* as the intellectual equals of critics, and by approaching *testimonio* as an intellectual production worthy of critical engagement.

The conclusion offers a reformulation of Nance’s position, which is now described as a passage “from poetics to prosaics.” Prosaics is a neologism borrowed from the Bakhtin scholars Gary Morson and Caryl Emerson, who define it as “a solidarity founded not on ecstatic fusion but instead on considered, contingent, concrete and undramatic actions in life” (as quoted in Nance 158). By linking *testimonio* to the sphere of concrete choices, Nance is pitting the genre against theoretical idealisms that would define the political as a sphere of unlimited possibilities or pure voluntarism. In its place, she advocates a theoretical pragmatism grounded in an understanding of the political as affording a finite or restricted number of access points to action at any given historical moment. It would be the task of *testimonio*, then, to make such points visible and to enjoin us to seize them.

The appendix, finally, contains a chronological discussion of the *testimonio* genre that would be suitable for readers unfamiliar with the history of the genre. It begins with a very brief panorama of the genre’s prehistory, which includes a limited selection of colonial *crónicas* and letters (Las Casas, Cabeza de Vaca and Sor Juana are mentioned, but others such as Columbus, Bernal Díaz, Garcilaso and Guamán Poma are not; no explanation is offered for this selection), and then moves to the 20th century, mentioning Che Guevara’s accounts of guerrilla warfare in Cuba and Bolivia, Oscar Lewis’s anthropological studies of rural Mexico, and Rodolfo Walsh’s “testimonial” novels. From there, Nance turns to a discussion of the construction of the genre, beginning with Miguel Barnet’s work and the institutionalization of *testimonio* as a literary genre by *Casa de las Américas* in 1970. This historical overview touches on a variety of Caribbean, Central American and South American (Southern Cone and Andean) works, including several works (such as Marta Traba’s *Conversación al sur*) that could be classified as fiction, and introduces several

cases that belie the idea that this cultural form belongs exclusively to the Left (the works of Richard Rodríguez and Cuban exile writers).

By way of conclusion, I want to return to Nance's appropriation of Lerner's "just world" hypothesis, which in my view illustrates both the originality of the project and the residual problems that continue to trouble its conclusions. First, let us imagine a bystander who happens to witness an apparent injustice—say, a person being violently abducted on a street corner by several men dressed in civilian clothing. According to Lerner's hypothesis, the bystander's desire to see the world as "just" *could* prompt him or her to intervene in order to ensure that an injustice does not go unredressed. However, the "fundamental delusion" postulated by Lerner might just as easily lead the observer to invent a likely explanation for the injustice that would alleviate the need to get involved. More specifically, the witness might seek a convincing rationale for why what transpired was *not* in fact unjust (consider the infamous phrase "*por algo será*," reportedly recited by Argentines seeking to rationalize the atrocities committed by the military dictatorship). Nance is well aware of this uncertainty in Lerner's hypothesis, which certainly does *not* guarantee that people will do anything to see that justice is done. She attempts to resolve the ambiguity by suggesting that most witnesses *will* opt to intervene—rather than invent convenient explanations—provided that they have reason to believe their interventions are likely to be effective. It would then be the double task of deliberative *testimonio* to publicize the fact that an injustice has been committed and to help the reader come to the conclusion that intervention is possible and urgently needed.

It is not difficult to imagine what this would look like in a context where the witness is literally standing face to face with the perpetrator and victim of a crime, and when intervention must happen *now*. However, the few examples Nance draws from *testimonio* texts tend to underscore—according to the experience of speakers like Elvira Alvarado (*Don't Be Afraid, Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart*)—that redress is seldom accomplished immediately and usually requires persistent struggle over the course of multiple generations. Intuition tells us that communicating the exigency of action over other modes of response

is considerably more complicated when witnesses are readers and the injustice takes place in a distant place, or when meaningful social change requires the perseverance of long-term strategies rather than a single decision here and now. It is far from clear whether Lerner's "just world" hypothesis could account for this linking of justice to a "long *durée*," or whether additional theoretical models would be needed to account for the creation of a new community of witnesses for the phenomenon of trans-generational political struggles.

At the same time, Nance's position on justice ("people do justice because they desire to believe it") strikes me as under-theorized insofar as it avoids the question of justice as such. Nance in fact never says what she means by "justice": Is it retributive or distributive (social) justice that she has in mind, or both? Who determines what is justice and what is revenge? Or, faced with a political decision, how can we calculate in advance which option, if any, will produce a just social result? As evidenced by the book's conclusion, Nance is certainly aware of these questions, and it is puzzling that she does not discuss in Chapter Three what she later terms the "aporias" of justice. If justice by definition cannot be calculated in advance, if it always has to do with the problem of applying general, repeatable rules to singular situations that are unprecedented, this ethical and epistemological "impasse" certainly does not alleviate our responsibility to act, but it does make it difficult to speak confidently about "doing justice" as if we knew in advance what that meant.

The position Nance stakes out is original, thought-provoking, and engages constructively on various levels with the history of *testimonio*'s reception. She claims that "deliberative" rhetoric, which has largely been ignored or marginalized by *testimonio* criticism, is in fact deserving of critical attention because it constitutes the most effective mode of communicating both the possibility of justice and the urgency of acting—and that it therefore offers an alternative to both the euphoric but naïve celebration of *testimonio* as well as the overly pessimistic mourning of a genre in decline. Her position calls for a reconsideration of the status of rhetorical language itself, which had been (prematurely, in her view) dismissed by critics anxious to highlight what distinguishes *testimonio*

from literary aesthetics. One element that could be more prominent in the development of this important argument, however, is a sustained analysis of specific *testimonio* texts that would demonstrate the importance not only of “deliberative” rhetoric, but also of reading.