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Review / Reseña

Marisol Montaña, Alejandro Solomianski, and Sofia Wolhein eds. *Otras Voces Nuevas identidades en la frontera sur de California (Testimonios)*. Raleigh: Editorial A Contracorriente, 2011.

Testimonies from the California Borderlands

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Marisol Montaña, Alejandro Solomianski, and Sofia Wolhein have produced a fascinating glimpse into the lives of Spanish-speaking immigrants in Southern California. These narratives allow the reader to gain new insight into the complexity of their daily struggles and understand the ways in which inhumane immigration laws affect every aspect of their lives. Many of the stories are disturbing and difficult but, as Solomianski states, the book is meant to “servir como una pequeña base de datos sobre algunos aspectos ocultos y tergiversados de la ‘realidad’ en el sur de California” (3).

This collection is the result of a course project at California State University, Los Angeles, where the students were instructed by their professor, Solomianski, to collect accounts of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries. In the prologue, he highlights the difficulties that the students had in carrying out such a project and explains the problems that some of the close relationships of those who tell their stories and those who transcribe them occasioned, but he overlooks the possibility that these subjects were more open about their lives precisely because of these connections. Since undocumented immigrants face overwhelming scrutiny, it is commendable that they were willing to share so much.

Solomianski also recognizes the inherent challenges of collecting and transcribing these stories and transforming them into a book while attempting to preserve their natural form. He writes extensively about the internal contradictions of testimonial literature in his introduction and his defense of the book against critics who hold the idea that testimonial literature cannot exist if it is recorded/filtered through an academic lens. This type of project brings to the forefront issues defining and giving voice to the subaltern, but that is exactly why it is a necessary endeavor.

The book is divided into six chapters, including the introduction. They are grouped according to themes that emphasize certain aspects of their stories. Some of the testimonies allude to the positive results of immigrating, such as coming to a country that is more open to sexual difference or finding an escape from a country whose entire social structure and economy was destroyed by war. Many of the people who tell their story regret their journeys to the U.S., but know they have nothing to return to in their home countries. There are many common themes in the stories and most of them would fit squarely into the category of “*desintegración familiar*.” All of them allude to violence, the poverty, humiliation, and the unscrupulous traffickers who bring them over and expose them to inhumane treatment as they take their life savings.

In the first chapter, “Sexualidad en el borde,” Miriam García and Miguel Vásquez, from Guatemala and Mexico respectively, tell their stories. Both Miriam and Miguel struggle to come to terms with their homosexuality because these lifestyles were not contemplated in an open

way in their countries. Miguel's story brings to light the increased discrimination which undocumented workers face. Many of the notes from the editors state that Miguel's partner, who transcribed the story, has greatly influenced Miguel's way of expressing himself. The editors also remark that one can still see Miguel's struggle to be comfortable in society as an openly gay man, but these footnotes are distracting and most readers would have arrived at the same conclusion without this intervention. Miriam's story is similar to Miguel's in that she was also ashamed of her homosexuality because Guatemalan society in the nineteen seventies was not tolerant of these ideas. In her life in the U.S., she also witnesses hypocrisy, but notes that there is one place, "un club de gente gay," where she can feel good and be herself- at least until Monday when she returns to her "vida normal" (45).

In the section titled, "Desintegración familiar," two of the testimonies are narrated by men who were young boys during the Civil War in El Salvador. Many Salvadorians suffered during that long conflict and have similar stories. As one of the *testimoniante*s points out, "[m]i nombre es Alejandro García pero no es importante porque como yo hubo muchos niños que vivieron mi misma experiencia"(68). In the third story, "¿Qué dijo la abuelita?", Elia Leyva tells her story of coming over from Mexico and how her family members "se han asimilado a las costumbres y la cultura de los Estados Unidos. Tras este proceso de asimilación ellos han, lamentablemente, perdido muchos rasgos de su identidad mexicana"(77). It is one of the most "positive" stories since la *abuelita* admits that though the family may have lost something they have had the opportunity to achieve their version of the "sueño americano".

The third *problemática*, called "Migrantes, tierra prometida y paraísos perdidos," shows how some companies take advantage of undocumented workers by paying them less than minimum wage, requiring them to work in extremely dangerous conditions and avoid taking responsibility for their actions. Víctor Sandoval's story is particularly poignant and traumatic since he recounts how his arm was disfigured when he fell into a pasta machine that was not working properly. Cristina Rivera's story of mistreatment in the factories is less dramatic, but her

inability to find a decent steady job and achieve a semblance of security will resonate with many readers.

The stories told in *La violencia de los bordes* have less obvious commonalities since violence and border issues are present in the majority of the stories in the collection. The main themes are domestic and gang violence. Throughout the book the *testimoniante*s describe their experiences of border crossings; however, María Rivas' tale of her crossing and the murder of her sister in the desert is the most detailed and tragic. Gustavo Mojica's testimony of his escape from his *pandilla* is not particularly inspiring; however, the transcription preserves the feeling of an oral narrative more than any other in the collection. The last testimony in this chapter is one that gained national attention because the *testimoniante* is Rosario Muñoz, a victim of domestic violence who killed her husband's girlfriend. It is a retelling of her story based on taped interviews that she gave for a local newspaper. She tells her story from her jail cell and tries to explain the circumstances of the murder without making excuses for it.

The final *problemática*, "Entre testimonios y la biografía, una configuración de los lazos familiares entre México y EE.UU.," contains only the testimony of Enedina Sánchez as transcribed by her daughters. The editors view the story as particularly problematic because they theorize that Sánchez adapts the story as she tells it to her daughters and their personal involvement in it will render them unable to transcribe it without inserting their own ideas into it. As Solomianski reflects:

Se trata de una narración extremadamente compleja y marcadamente extensa en comparación con los otros once textos que integran el volumen. [...] Sin embargo, no puede afirmarse que todo relato oral y fidedigno configura automáticamente lo que venimos llamando un testimonio. En el caso de esta multiforme narración, que por momentos pareciera ser una elaboración alegórico-literaria acerca de las relaciones entre México y EE.UU., se percibe una ambigüedad genérica muy similar a la que ya habíamos advertido en el testimonio "La identidad gay en el otro lado. (30)

Solomianski feels that the ambiguity of the text is due to "la extrema intimidad entre el testimoniante y el mediador intelectual"(30).

Admittedly, these complications exist but do not invalidate the power of the *testimoniante's* reflections.

In the introduction it is noted that the discussion of theory is limited “al mínimo necesario para que los testimonios queden plenamente expuestos en su complejidad y profundidad”(4) and for the most part the testimonies are given the space needed to allow their stories to unfold. However, Solomianski also notes that, “Los editores hemos agregado numerosas notas destacando los momentos en que el texto se opone a sí mismo y construye significados no previstos” (21-22) and, in a few cases, these notes are disruptive. One example can be found in Miguel Vázquez’s story about his family in Mexico. He refers to their living situation as typical of the “clase media” and the note, which points out that “la clasificación socio-económica queda notablemente relativizada”(50), interrupts the flow of the story. The editors also make numerous comments about which parts of his story are influenced by his life-partner and the language of LGBT advocacy. They say that the collection is directed at academics or sophisticated readers, thus we should be trusted to come to our own conclusions. These kinds of contradictions are inherent in real life and are part of what makes all of us human and fallible. It is also what makes the testimonies a fascinating look into the multi-layered ways in which society influences our sense of self on a social and personal level.

The change from “Espero que haigan buena suerte” to “Espero que tengan buena suerte” also interferes with the idea of letting the storyteller speak directly. There is a great deal of diversity in the ways people speak Spanish and although “haigan” is nonstandard, it does not impede understanding. Students in language and culture classes should be exposed to these forms since they reflect the way people talk. However, this is a small complaint and the modification does not take away from the narrative the power of the work as a whole.

All the stories, though polished narratives, retain the contradictions of reality and truly draw the readers into the lives of these immigrants. Starting with the epigram from Borges about how “el arte debe ser ese espejo que nos revela nuestra propia cara” we become aware of the didactic nature of the collection. The reader is meant to learn something from these

individual stories that take place in California, but are are being lived out across the country. I teach in North Carolina and I plan to use this book in a Latino Studies/Service Learning course next semester because these *voces* really need to be heard.