



Vol. 5, No. 1, Fall 2007, 253-258

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Bartow, Joanna R. *Subject to Change: The Lessons of Latin American Women's Testimonio for Truth, Fiction, and Theory*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005

Writing the Other: Rhetoric and Gender in Testimonial Writing

Aarti Madan

University of Pittsburgh

In describing mid-nineteenth century reception of Sarmiento's now institutionalized masterpiece *Facundo*, Julio Ramos effectively indicates that issues of veracity within the historico-literary sphere have traumatized Latin America for nearly two centuries. With his declaration that "[t]he split between poetry (as well as fiction) and true social history generates a foundational tension," we note that literature is relegated to what might be demarcated the left side of the split, whereas authoritative forms of historical truth reside comfortably on the right (13). It is precisely this split-

cum-tension that Joanna R. Bartow attempts to analyze and overcome in her *Subject to Change: The Lessons of Latin American Women's Testimonio for Truth, Fiction, and Theory*.

As evident by her title's double entendre, Bartow's study is foremost a text about the contradictions inherent to testimonial writing yet also an intensive analysis of the rhetoric that gives shape to said contradictions. The subject, for Bartow, might be either she with agency, she who acts and speaks with agency—the agent; or, on the contrary, the subject might be she who lacks agency, she who must submit to another's domination, another's authority or control—the object. With this wordplay in mind, readers might better comprehend the central interrogatives that frame Bartow's reading: "At what junctures in testimonial texts, fiction, and theory does the subject (object of attention) become subject (autonomous agent) or the other way around? Who legitimates the change of subject? Who changes the subject's terms of self-representation?" (230).

Crucial to these questions, Bartow suggests, is the issue of gender and hierarchy. It is in this vein, then, that she reanalyzes and reframes romanticized notions of the Other vis-à-vis meticulous analyses of testimonial texts, fiction, and theory produced during *testimonio's* peak. Indeed, Bartow's unconventional approach to *testimonio* distinguishes her from the many critics who have addressed the subject matter in recent years—that is, she skirts from any previous notions of the genre as being anti-literary by entirely embracing the literary. What makes Bartow's rereading even more unique, however, is her graceful intertwining of both feminist theory's culpability in what she refers to as "idealized readings" and its simultaneous ability to zoom in on *testimonio's* potential beyond prior narrow formulations regarding authenticity, truth, and legitimacy. In this line, Bartow contends that gender has been left by the wayside despite its inherent relationship to the questions of identity imperative to any reading of *testimonio*. Consequently, recent scholarship has seen "a tendency toward the stagnation of subaltern identity" (28). Thus, Bartow's motivation is, in part, to overcome the aforementioned split-cum-tension but also to surmount it, and her corpus readily indicates this impulse.

In addition to the intertextuality she achieves between *testimonio*, fiction, and theory, Bartow focuses on Latin American texts by women in order to underscore a glaring contradiction evident in the academy; theorists writing from the United States or Europe consistently employ the Third World, Latin America, and women writers across the board as the witting or unwitting beneficiaries of their ideas' mediation. In other words, the Occident again aspires to empower—to enlighten—the Orient by means of its epistemological production, yet often times this production is a convoluted stretch that only further marginalizes women writers by employing them as raw material to be exploited for the purposes of theory. Bartow thus contends that testimonial texts by Latin American women are susceptible to the exact mediation untangled, unpacked, and undone in their own work, albeit sans an active reception to their efforts within and contributions to theories based on their very works.

Certainly, mediation is the central problematic in Bartow's first chapter, "Legitimation: Mediated *Testimonios*, Authority and Vicarious Identities," in which she carefully stacks the building blocks of veracity, contradiction, and gender that form the base for the book's subsequent chapters. By means of an intricately weaved analysis of Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray and Rigoberta Menchu's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, and Carolina Maria de Jesus's *Quarto de Despejo*, Bartow examines textual legitimation and, more importantly, veracity's role in ensuring it within the context of the transcriber and testimonial subject's hegemonic relationship. She patiently dissects the complexities of this relationship within the testimonial process, arguing that it "is not unidirectional: both transcriber and testimonial subject use each other's voice, legitimating one another" (33). With this multidirectional feat, then, the text's authority enters the spotlight because though the transcriber is presumably a silent force behind the curtains, Bartow is careful to note that her participation cannot be without consequence. As a result, the transcription process of writing the Other ultimately destabilizes and contradicts the project's original impetus—to allow the disenfranchised subject a voice with which to express her group's collective truth as a response to official "truths." Bartow contends, then,

that this inherent paradox can potentially yield what she denominates a “vicarious identity,” in which transcribers (such as Poniatowska and Burgos-Debray) self-legitimate by empathizing with their testimonial subjects, thus simultaneously resolving and surpassing a self-perceived deficiency (Poniatowska and Burgos-Debray respectively explore and enhance their identities as Mexican and Latin American through their engagement with testimonial subjects). Perhaps the final unifying force behind this chapter, then, is that Bartow delves into the potential for self-representation (being allowed to speak) and subject construction (speaking for) in each text in order to highlight testimonial discourse’s contradictions. In doing so, she underscores *testimonio*’s relevance to Latin American narrative, marking it “as an inquiry into identity and solidarity, as a form [...] where inner workings of the writerly task are brought to the surface, and as a text that concretely engages with the sociopolitical realities that concern so many Latin American writers” (32).

Bartow’s intent, we see, has been to coalesce *testimonio* into the broader expanse of Latin American narrative but also to engage with feminist theory, and she certainly achieves the former in the book’s first chapter. It is with her second and fourth chapters, however, that she most adeptly demonstrates the tripartite relationship between *testimonio*, fiction, and feminist theory by directly addressing novelistic endeavors by the Brazilian author Clarice Lispector and the Chilean Diamela Eltit. As if already aware of potential ramifications regarding her analysis of the “testimonial elements” in the fiction of these writers, Bartow appends a disclaimer to these sections, noting that she does not assume that these works are actual responses to or dialogues with testimonial writing; additionally, she markedly states that her reading of fiction should not make light of the harsh reality and political impetus present in *testimonio*. In this vein, then, she defends her inclusion of fictional texts by highlighting their ability to enhance and ameliorate traditional readings of *testimonio*:

While the combination of *testimonio* and works of fiction may appear to undermine *testimonio*’s political impact as a discourse that challenges hegemonic and elite literary discourse and official history, the

revelations created by this intertextual reading indeed expose ways in which *testimonio* subverts hegemonic assumptions of identity and agency beyond a truth value that can limit the possibilities of the informant and reinforce her location on the margins. (108)

Indeed, Bartow's analysis of Lispector's *A Paixão Segundo G.H.* and *A Hora da Estrela* centers on the hegemonic nature of mediation by focusing on the "power relationships, linguistic devices and linguistic deviations" that the subaltern voice must surmount in order to appropriate and legitimate an identity (103). Through a careful reading of G.H. and Rodrigo's respective encounters with Janair/the roach and Macabéa, Bartow discovers in fiction the constantly changing and fabricated dialogue evident between the privileged writer/transcriber and the marginalized subject/informant. Though Lispector's fictional encounters are clearly immersed in specific contexts of language, form, and content, Bartow notes that both narratives engage with the notion of "vicarious identity" that she mentions in Chapter 1. That is, both of Lispector's mediators attempt to overcome a self-perceived deficiency—a lack—by another characterized by precisely that lack; each desire to know and to appropriate the Other, specifically through writing. In addition, both of Lispector's subjects categorically maintain their representativity, but they are simultaneously silenced by the very narrative devices that allow them an identity. Consequently, Bartow contends that Lispector's novels explicitly articulate the precarious situation that lies at the core of all testimonial texts, that of both allowing a marginalized entity a voice and of writing another's existence. This testimonial process is articulated in gendered terms due the incorporation of the male mediator Rodrigo S.M., thus allowing a point of entry for feminist theory.

Again, Bartow's ability to thread feminist theory through the testimonial elements of Lispector's narratives falls somewhat short in its execution, but she compensates for this lack by means of her analyses of Eltit's *El Padre Mío* and, in particular, *Lúmpérica*. Rhetoric and gender effectively coalesce in Bartow's reading as she explores the paradox that runs rampant in Eltit's physical and linguistic displacements, thus demonstrating the Chilean's facility to move beyond *testimonio*. That is,

reconciliation proves impossible in these highly fragmented texts, and Eltit's notorious experimentalism allows for multiple interpretations; as such, there exists little pretense of veracity or truth-value in her representation of the marginalized *lumpen* under the devastation of Pinochet's dictatorship. Bartow argues that Eltit discards notions of "sympathetic mediation and self-affirming, satisfying life stories" while signaling that writing the Other is, in effect, an unviable option, for writing is inadequate to represent and translate El Padre Mío's incoherent schizophrenia and L. Iluminada's fragmented and performative existence. That critics and theorists are discomfited and disconcerted by this inaccessibility—this subaltern that cannot speak—allows marginalized identities a semblance of solidarity. In other words, these identities are not designed for consumption by the critics' circle and can accordingly elide interpretation and mediation, thus, declares Bartow, "Eltit underscores and undoes her/our interpretative privilege or interpretive powerlessness, and does not provide a packageable narration of marginal identity" (198).

Perhaps another reason, moreover, for Eltit's efficacy in her translation beyond *testimonio* and her consequent inclusion in Bartow's study is her utilization of the female body as testimony. Bartow contends that the backstage contradiction and sexuality of *testimonio* contrarily occupy the spotlight in *Lumpérica* in order to ultimately create a sensation tantamount to discomfort, for that which is shined upon is the ugly, the abject, the formerly hidden. L. Iluminada's sexuality manifests itself through the performance and reification of her body, thus making visible that which is normally invisible under authoritarian regimes. In *Lumpérica*, then, the female body functions as a tool for subversion because her abjection—a result of neoliberal authoritarian mechanisms—is visible to all and thus points a finger at its very cause. In this vein, gender provides the lens to examine issues of class, exploitation, and torture under the duress of authoritarian regimes while sexuality, normally erased in testimonial narratives, becomes a central component in dismantling hegemonic structures.