

CRITICA / REVIEW

John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota, 2004). 121 pp.

From the Metropolis: A Critique of *Testimonio* and the *Testimonio* of the Critic

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This thin volume gathers four influential essays previously published by John Beverley, in various venues and in some cases more than once, between 1989 and 2001. In this sense, as Beverley himself points out in his “Preface” to the book, this collection “constitute[s] a record of my involvement over the past fifteen years with the narrative form called in Latin American Spanish *testimonio* (testimonial narratives would be the closest English equivalent)” (ix). The author’s awareness regarding the historical, contingent, and “testimonial” character of his own essays is unambiguous and worthy of note—a point to which I will return later. This explains, among other things, his declared reluctance to alter the texts: “Beyond correcting typographical errors and anachronisms, updating the notes, and adding an introduction, I have resisted the impulse to revise them” even though, he says, he “would not always put things in the same way today” (ix).

In the first essay, “The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio*” (1989), Beverley explores the roots, emergence, functions and specific features of this narrative form—by

contrast and in relation to other literary and non-literary practices such as autobiography, the picaresque novel, *novela-testimonio*, oral history, etc. The provisional definition he offers of *testimonio*, as “a nonfictional, popular-democratic form of epic narrative,” (33) is that this is “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet [...] form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (31). The main example he uses to illustrate his chief arguments is the now classical *I Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, which, as we shall see, is also the focal point in the rest of his essays. Always lucid and wary of formalist approaches and other pitfalls, Beverley remains consistently attentive to the dialectics embodied by this new textual form and forcefully asserts that “What has to be understood [...] is precisely how *testimonio* puts into question the existing institution of literature as an ideological apparatus of alienation and domination at the same time that it constitutes itself as a new form of literature.” Thus, recognizing that the birth of *testimonio* takes place at the margin of literature (insofar as it emerges as a contestatory new form “in which we can at the same time witness and be a part of the emerging culture of an international proletarian/popular-democratic subject in its period of ascendancy”), Beverley cannot help but admit that *testimonio* too was becoming, at the moment of the writing of his essay, “a new postfictional form of literature” (43). In this sense, recognizing that literature has never been a popular-democratic cultural practice (a topic that repeated throughout his other essays and resulted in his 1993 book, *Against Literature*), Beverley concludes his initial remarks on this subject, as he aptly puts it, with a skeptical tone: “How much of a favor do we do *testimonio* by positing [...] that it

has become a new form of literature or by making it an alternative reading to the canon?” (44).

The second essay, “‘Through All Things Modern’: Second Thoughts on Testimonio,” (1991) was written in the wake of the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. The skepticism with which Beverley concluded his previous article seems to deepen here (“in dealing with the *testimonio* I have also begun to discover in myself a kind of posthumanist agnosticism about literature [...] nothing you experience in an essay of this sort is going to make you reconsider what you fundamentally believe [...] There may come a time when we have a new community of things we can call literature; but not now. Among the many lessons *testimonio* has to offer us is one that suggests that it is no longer a question of ‘reading against the grain’ [...] but of beginning to read against literature itself”) [58], but so does his sense of urgency regarding a clear understanding about the historical location, character, and role of *testimonio*—especially as it concerns the relationship of this new form to literature and the academy. Thus, reviewing the development of literature and the university as both necessary and problematic institutions in the evolution of Latin American societies, and in contemporary processes of decolonization and postcoloniality, Beverley concludes that: “Testimonio is located at the intersection of the cultural forms of bourgeois humanism, like literature and the printed book, engendered by the academy and colonialism and imperialism, and subaltern cultural forms” (52). In this regard, he says, at certain critical moments *testimonio* becomes a discursive space where an alliance between a radicalized intelligentsia and the subaltern can be negotiated. As in the previous piece, *I Rigoberta Menchú* continues to be the main text the critic uses to support his observations.

In an addendum to this essay Beverley takes up a point he only insinuated in his first piece: the relationship between *testimonio* and postmodernism. Although he initially admits that “there is a problem in applying a term that is generally conceived in relation to the *narcissism* and anomie of post-Fordist capitalist societies to those represented in much of Latin American and Third World *testimonio*, which either have not gone through the stage of ‘modernity’ (in the Weberian sense) yet, or display an ‘uneven’ modernity (what society does not, however?)” (58-59), he nevertheless finds some points of contact between *testimonio* and the postmodern topography: namely, their shared destabilization of both the distinction between elite and popular cultures and the notion of the “grand narratives” of Western progress and enlightenment. Despite their respective shortcomings, Beverley finds that *testimonio* and postmodernism have included non-traditional, subaltern social groups (lower-middle class, working-class, and minority sectors) in the processes of cultural production and consumption, and, therefore, challenge modernist aesthetics. As in his previous article, he emphasizes that *testimonio* offers a new manner of articulating traditional oppositions “and thus of defining new paradigms for the relationship between the intelligentsia and popular classes” (61). *Testimonio*, he says, is best defined by its sense of urgency, it “must above all be a story that *needs* to be told, that involves some pressing and immediate problem of communication,” (61) and, for this reason, it may not be “suited to become the primary narrative form of an elaborated socialist society like Cuba, or even of periods of postrevolutionary consolidation and struggle, as in Nicaragua after 1979” (61). From all of this Beverley concludes that “like postmodernism itself (and more particularly like its ancestor, the picaresque novel), *testimonio* is a transitional cultural form appropriate to

processes of rapid social and historical change, but also destined to give way to different forms of representation as these processes move forward [...] to other stages” (61).

“The Real Thing” (1996), the third installment in the series, is “an essay on Rigoberta Menchú and what she means, or does, for us” (63). Here Beverley explores the manner in which metropolitan critics approach her *testimonio* and, ultimately, what they *do to* her and to the text she produced in collaboration with Elisabeth Burgos—the Venezuelan anthropologist who acted as Menchú’s interlocutor. What is at issue, says Beverley, is the respect and autonomy Menchú ought to have as a human being, and “the status of the testimonial narrator as a subject in her own right, rather than as someone who exists *for us*” (65). In other words, Beverley implicitly asks how we in the metropolis attempt to appropriate, assimilate, and often deconstruct her *testimonio*. What kind of demands do we make of it and to what (Western) “standards” do we try to hold it accountable? All of this against the backdrop of *the Real* (herein the title of the essay), which Beverley, citing Lacan, defines as “the order of ‘that which resists symbolization absolutely’” (63).

Though Beverley continues to warn about the perils of incorporating Menchú’s *testimonio* into the Western literary and humanistic canon, he also acknowledges that part of the force of this form (“where the convention of fictionality has been suspended”), particularly in the case of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, “is to displace the centrality of intellectuals, and what they recognize as culture—including literature” (69). Thus, suggesting a slight revision of his earlier ideas, he says:

In fact, I am beginning to think that the idea of *testimonio* as a kind of antiliterature I expressed in my first essays [...] may well neglect the fact that the

Althusserian idea of ‘theoretical antihumanism’ on which it is based is passing, for all practical purposes, from leftist professors like myself to pragmatic administrators concerned with downsizing and adapting the traditional humanities curriculum to suit the emerging requirements of economic globalization, with its new emphasis on media, communications, and cybernetics (68).

If Menchú’s narrative subjectivity and agency are the real issue at stake here, as Beverley proposes, it might be important for us to “worry less about how *we* appropriate Menchú, and to understand and appreciate more how she appropriates us for her purposes” (69).

Beverley notes that some of the exigencies critics and other academics attempt to impose on Menchú—often expressed in the form of reservations—have to do with the veracity, authenticity, or *representativity* of her account. At this juncture he challenges, for the first time, the assertions of anthropologist David Stoll concerning Menchú’s unreliability as a narrator. With this, he initiates his now familiar debate/polemics with Stoll on this subject—which becomes the focus of his next essay and also of the introduction he wrote for the present volume. The argument, Beverley intimates, continues to be around the question of authority and representation; around the attempts to encase Menchú and other narrators like her back in the role of “native informants,” granting them only the opportunity of being witnesses, “but not the power to create their own narrative authority and negotiate its conditions of truth and representativity” (73). *Testimonio*, he concludes, “is both an art and a strategy of subaltern memory” (73). For some reason, Beverley argues, anthropologists like Stoll and Burgos feel entitled, or authorize themselves, to represent the indigenous world inhabited by folk like Rigoberta

Menchú, which takes us back again to the question of agency and the authority that she strives for:

The Real that *I Rigoberta Menchú* forces us to confront [...] is not only that of the subaltern as ‘represented’ victim of history but also as agent of a transformative project that aspires to become hegemonic in its own right. For this project, testimonio is a means rather than an end in itself (75).

Noting that the subaltern, the narrator of *testimonios*, does not wish to “simply signify” his or her subalternity through these cultural practices—in other words, they do not want to remain in the position of subalterns forever—Beverley announces that “this is perhaps the best way to confront the circumstance that the moment of testimonio is over” (77). Not testimonial forms as such, he clarifies, but the originality and urgency that defined *testimonio*: “The ‘state of emergency’ that drove our fascination and critical engagement with it, has undoubtedly passed” (77). Beverley argues that, with his work on Domitila Barrios’s famous testimonio, *Let Me Speak!*, Javier Sanjinés wrote the epitaph for *testimonio*. Sanjinés’s point, according to Beverley, “is that testimonios [...] can no longer be considered an adequate representation of subalternity in relation to domination; that—along with much of the traditional left and trade-union movement—they too have become a nostalgia; that new forms of political imagination are needed; that, as in everything else in life, we must move on” (78).

In his fourth and last essay, “What Happens When the Subaltern Speaks: Rigoberta Menchú, Multiculturalism, and the Presumption of Equal Worth” (2001), Beverley tackles the subjects outlined in the profuse title by re-engaging his debate with David Stoll—whose book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*,

had appeared two years earlier, in 1999—and by expanding the controversy to include a critique of Mario Roberto Morales’s book, *La articulación de las diferencia: o el síndrome de Maximón: los discursos literarios y políticos del debate interétnico en Guatemala* (1999). As he does elsewhere, Beverley reaffirms here his view that Stoll’s probing of Menchú’s veracity or authenticity is in fact an attempt to deny her the active agency she seeks and is entitled to have, her quest to become a subject of history. For Beverley, Stoll’s questioning amounts to *resubalternizing* her discourse, “a narrative that aspired to (and achieved) hegemony” (83). The argument, as enunciated in the title of the essay, embraces the academic and political differences between Beverley and Stoll regarding the tenets of postmodernism and multiculturalism:

The connection between postmodernism and multiculturalism that bothers Stoll is predicated on the fact that multiculturalism carries with it [...] a ‘presumption of equal worth.’ That presumption of equal worth implies a demand for epistemological relativism that coincides with the postmodernist critique of the Enlightenment paradigm. If there is no one universal standard for truth, then claims about truth are contextual (86).

It is on this score that Beverley then goes after Morales and his ideas about *mestizaje cultural* and the *interethnic debate*: “Morales shares with David Stoll a preoccupation with the way in which *I Rigoberta Menchú* has been canonized by multiculturalism and postcolonial and subaltern studies theory in the U.S. academy” (87). Beverley sees Stoll’s and Morales’ position—i.e., their shared critique of Menchú—a sort of class anxiety, the desire to neutralize and contain the subaltern within the boundaries

of a discourse that is intelligible, familiar, and acceptable for bourgeois and petit bourgeois intellectuals.

Stoll and Morales point in somewhat different directions politically, although both share a critique of the project of the Latin American revolutionary left [...] To the extent that they make that critique through a neutralization and containment of Menchú's own claim to authority, both of their books seem to me contemporary instances of what Ranajit Guha calls [...] 'the prose of counter-insurgency' (93).

Although already implicit in the arguments and terminology he displays throughout his four essays, in the "Preface" and "Introduction" (8 and 28 respectively), as the blurb on the cover aptly puts it, Beverley "examines the broader historical, political, and ethical issues that this literature raises." To do this, Beverley traces the evolution of his ideas around *testimonio* and the various theoretical issues implicated in it. Contextually, the trajectory of his involvement ("my engagement," he calls it) with this narrative form has traversed the last decade and a half, from the end of the Cold War to globalization and the current, post-9/11 realities. Conceptually, he has moved from a certain type of Marxism into the realm of postmodernism:

It was that concern [with concepts of history and culture that no longer depended on, to use Jean-François Lyotard's well-known phrase, the 'grand narrative' of Western modernity and modernization] that led me to my subsequent involvement with the question of postmodernism [...] My interest in postmodernism and subaltern studies was a way of both mourning and reflecting critically on the reasons for the defeat or collapse of the illusion of radical social change in Latin

America and the United States I had shared with the protagonists of testimonio (xii).

It is through this new lens that Beverley examines first his trajectory and then, in the five parts of his introduction (“Truth and Solidarity,” “Empire and Multitude,” “The Nation and Modernity,” “A Radical Multiculturalism” and “September 11”) a series of issues, many of which he has previously explored in his earlier essays.

Perhaps true to the spirit of postmodernism, one of the curious features of this narrative, especially noticeable in the “Preface,” is the manner in which the critic inserts himself into the tale (a postmodern performance in which all boundaries become effaced, where all authority is both lost and gained at the same time?): “For, as my remarks on David Stoll will indicate, I am also part of the story,” says Beverley (ix). Then comes the detailed account of the birth and progression of the well-known polemic, already mentioned above, in which he and Stoll were the protagonists (xiii-xvii). But this sense of participating directly in history isn’t really new. As Beverley reminds us, he ended his 1989 essay “with the claim that [...] testimonio is [...] a new form of narrative literature in which *we* can at the same time *witness and be a part of* the emerging culture of an international proletarian/popular-democratic subject in its period of ascendancy” [the emphasis is mine] (x). Here the narrative “I” is cautiously veiled behind the “we,” but the presence of the critic continues to be conspicuous: “The ‘popular-democratic’ after the slash was, of course, a way of hedging my bet with Marxism, but not too much so. Generally speaking, protagonists of testimonio in the Cold War years, like myself, saw it as a narrative form closely linked to national liberation movements...” (x). And rightfully so, perhaps, because this is indeed a record of Beverley’s personal contribution

to a debate that, while mainly restricted to a rather small academic/literary circle of the United States, has always had broader implications. This is his legacy, his *testimonio* so to speak.