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Testimonial Encounters in the Americas

Molly Appel & Leila Pazargadi
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Content

Testimonial Encounters in the Americas: Threading Community Together via Testimonial Disclosure

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1 In 2003, when browsing for books at a soon-to-be endangered brick-and-mortar bookstore, I came across a curious, but telling display: memoirs by Middle Eastern women filled the bestsellers' table. All of a sudden, I saw veiled woman after veiled woman staring back at me, not just from within this particular bookshop, but from many scattered throughout the country. It soon became clear that after 9/11, a new era of American imperialism was ushered in and Middle Eastern American testimonials had found their place. On the one hand, with the 2003 memoir boom, many Middle Eastern women found their voices and were able to assert their agency through autobiographical disclosure, particularly after surviving and leaving behind national conflicts in their home countries. In her text, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, Gillian Whitlock observes that, since memoirs are able to engage global audiences and humanitarian organizations, they act as "soft weapons" capable of pushing for change (Whitlock 3). Yet, on the other hand, the rapid production and the pressure placed on Middle Eastern women to disclose their innermost worlds from "behind the veil" presented a darker side to the industry, one that could exploit and sensationalize women life writers. There were slippages and exaggerations in texts, as in the case of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), which in part was used as propaganda meant to justify American imperial intercession in the Middle East. There was recycled iconography like the tired veil that was repeatedly vilified on cover after cover, signaling a faraway exotic land and peoples begging for Western domination. Taking this one step further, texts like Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love* (also published as *Honor Lost*; 2003) was the most sensationalized and outrageous example wherein the author completely fabricated the harrowing story of her supposed best

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friend Dalia's demise at the hand of an honor killing in Jordan. The neo-orientalist production, book cover, and promotion of the text reinforced a recycled colonial narrative: salvation in the West from the brutal and backward East. Yet, what became clear during the Khouri affair was not only the author's trespasses, but also the publishing company's culpability in printing such dubious and unchecked claims in Khouri's book. The thirst for ***understanding*** or ***knowing*** Middle Easterners was so great that publishing houses were clamoring for narratives, however exaggerated. They did not care.

2 Khouri's hoax resurrected ***testimonio***[1] debates surrounding ***I, Rigoberta Menchú*** (***Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la consciencia***; 1983) and tapped into previously discussed questions regarding the intersections of conflict, human rights, and autobiographical disclosure. As columnist Andrew Bolt pointed out at the time about the discovery concerning Khouri,

> Why not lie, when it works so well that Rigoberta Menchú won a Nobel peace prize through her even more faddish fibbing in her *I, Rigoberta Menchu*? The Khouri hoax becomes the latest episode in a history of fakes, frauds and fibbers which links together a series of testimonies and autoethnographies in the recent past by those who bear the most sacred marks of victimhood, and particularly that ethnic thing. (qtd. in Whitlock, *Soft Weapons* 110)

3 The comparison of Norma Khouri to Rigoberta Menchú is compelling, since both authors' works unwittingly expose larger questions about the pressure of market forces and writer exaggerations with the weight and validity of their historical conflicts hanging in the balance.

4 The 2003 memoir boom harkened back to the pivotal Latinx American testimonial genre – the ***testimonio***, which had its own "boom" in the 70s and 80s when new publication outlets became available to local activists responding to global crises. The ***testimonio*** amplifies the voice of an oppressed person and makes a direct and demanding address to a reader who is called upon to listen and act in political solidarity against the very structures of Western, "first-world" knowledge. The reception of ***I, Rigoberta Menchú*** (1983) – one of the most well-known literary "controversies" in the Americas – revealed the crucial difference between what Maria Lugones calls "collaborative witnessing," witnessing on the side of power, and "witnessing faithfully," witnessing against the grain of power, on the side of resistance (Lugones 7). The urgency of this distinction continues as the post-2000s have also seen U.S. publishers popularizing fictional ethnic-American narratives with a "testimonial" appeal to a middle-class, predominantly white readership, and at the same time, decolonial and feminist of color activists, artists, and educators have revived *testimonio* and testimonial practice as a liberating methodology among oppressed American communities. Indeed, the discourse surrounding

the *testimonio* debate is a running thread and reference throughout our special issue.

5 Despite these troubling examples, testimonials written by migrants possess the power to offer eyewitness accounts that disrupt colonial paradigms and hegemonic barriers. They break through monoliths established by their newly-adopted host countries and add diverse voices to show the ways in which ethnic Americans carve out a place for themselves. Furthermore, as they reconcile what it means to have lost home, testimonial writers in the Americas tend to search for identity as they explore the prospect of a new home. Indeed, testimony, trauma, and memory comingle to add layered complexity to the process of life writing and eye witnessing. For example, the migrant life writing works that came out of the post-9/11 era and the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis illustrate how memoirs published in the United States have offered compelling testimony of migrant experience, including the unsustainable conditions of life in a country from which it is hard to report and the difficult process of emigrating to countries that are hostile to foreigners. Through the aesthetics of testimonials, immigrant writers are often able to create what Gillian Whitlock terms "empathetic witnesses," who might be more receptive to a previously ignored point of view (*Soft Weapons* 77). However, as Whitlock later points out in *Postcolonial Life Narratives: Testimonial Transactions* (2015), there is fragility concerning the power that indigenous or immigrant testimonies can assert, since their efficacy in advocating for awareness and change depends on reader reception and recognition (*Postcolonial* 142). This precarity of migrant testimonial reception is further compounded by intersectional identities concerning religion, class, gender, and sexuality. Observations about the process of production, market forces, and reader reception all demonstrate how testimonial writing and publication is highly mediated.

6 As we know, testimonial writing in the Americas has a long, centuries-old history that has shaped the development and publication of a range of literary genres across the hemisphere. Yet, when considering past discussions about the intersection of life writing and American literature, the discourse has not been as diverse as it could have been. As guest editors, we considered how we could diversify the voices of our special issue, alerting readers and scholars to the potential vastness of ethnic North American studies, but also to the ethical implications of mediating and writing testimonials. This is why we include essays exploring Armenian, Bangladeshi, Guatemalan, and Chilean writers from the U.S. and Canada (which is, unfortunately, often overlooked in American studies). For us, it was not only imperative to find unique and distinct voices to feature in our collection, but to also include thoughtful questions about writers exploring the self as it relates to themes of migration,

resettlement, and social justice. These themes, considered alongside the civil conflicts explored in our essays, add complex dimensions to the testimonials linking self to community. Furthermore, through careful attention to form, this special issue examines how contemporary testimonial aesthetics have played a crucial, yet overlooked, role in amplifying the voices of those who suffer under the conditions of neoliberal globalization. Theirs are transnational voices to which we must listen.

7 The first essay of our collection, Talar Chahinian's "The Space in Between: Overlapping Narratives of Arrival and Departure in Armenian-American Literary and Visual Arts," makes an important contribution to the fields of diaspora studies and Armenian studies, as it tracks the writings of displaced Armenians who first moved to Lebanon following the WWI genocide before resettling in America after the Lebanese Civil War. Doubly exiled due to regional conflicts, Western Armenians have to reconcile their trauma relating to multiple losses of home. What is significant about Chahinian's assessment is her focus on the way in which Beirut serves as a conduit for testimonial disclosure by contemporary Armenian artists engaging in photography, filmmaking, and writing. These auteurs pay homage to Beirut as a home left behind that exists in memory in the present, as a cultural epicenter for diasporic roadways. Chahinian's thoughtful exploration of varying formal modes allows the reader to explore diverse interpretations of testimonial production. As she sifts through the creativity that is laced with trauma in the works of Vehanoush Tekian, Hrayr Eulmessekian, and Ara Madzounian, she points out a useful notion that their works are diasporic in their "sedentary attachment" to Beirut, a space for the diaspora to pursue cultural production in exile. At the same time, it also becomes a lost home when Armenians are forced to move from there again. Beirut serves as both the city of arrival for post-WWI Armenians and departure for Armenians fleeing the Lebanese Civil War decades later. Beirut and its Bourj Hammoud neighborhood provided a paradigm for "Little Armenias" elsewhere, showing the way in which Armenians recreated the streets, schools, churches, and linguistic stronghold for Western Armenian culture. The city, therefore, becomes the ultimate site for testimonial recording and disclosure; it archives civil conflict in the very gravel of its streets.

8 Like Chahinian, Jennifer Reimer considers how form and aesthetics can help to facilitate testimony and uncover its power in "Tarfia Faizullah's Poetics of Testimony and Transnational Feminist Praxis." Reimer argues that poetic disclosure can serve as a site for transnational feminist argument and inquiry. Focusing on the Bangladeshi poet, Tarfia Faizullah, Reimer considers how her collection, ***Seam***, offers a testimonial dimension, though not traditionally disclosed as in the case of other testimonials. Faizullah used her Fulbright

fellowship to interview the *birangona*, the "war heroines" who had been raped during the Bangladesh Liberation War during the 1970s (Reimer 26). Just as Chahinian, who refers to the WWI genocide and the Lebanese Civil War as the backdrops for her artists' musings on home, identity, and memory, so, too, does Reimer consider how the Bangladeshi conflict intensifies testimonial disclosure. For Faizullah, her own experience in the American diaspora is as much part of the framing as are the stories of the Bangladeshi war survivors. Through her stunning close readings, Reimer operates on the second-wave feminist notion that the personal is political and vice versa. Poetry becomes testimony and testimony becomes poetry. Reimer investigates critical questions concerning the intersection of feminist writing, eye witnessing, and testimonial disclosure. Yet, what is notable here is that Faizullah is an interlocutor who writes alongside women's testimonies as opposed to speaking for them.

9 The poetics of testimonials is a common thread throughout this special collection, weaving together Reimer's findings with Joshua Deckman's focus on intersectional testimonial poetics. As Deckman similarly notes in "Soft Politics: Latinx Solidarity (Baby) in Maya Chinchilla's *The Cha Cha Files: A Chapina Poética* (2014)," the use of a "soft aesthetic" in Guatemalan American Maya Chinchilla's poetry achieves feminist solidarity rooted in queer activism. This "radical softness," Deckman argues, conveys a type of vulnerability that shows the way in which the body can create community with others to form a radical body politic. In his close reading, Deckman evaluates the way in which Chinchilla infuses her poetry with personal vulnerability to build bridges with other Guatemalan Americans, women migrants, and those in the LGBTQ+ communities who endeavor to identify their shared humanity despite experiences of marginalization and displacement. In weaving testimonial accounts throughout her poetry, Chinchilla uncovers previously silenced histories of conflict, genocide, and oppression. Chinchilla's work turns traditional testimonial disclosure on its head, fusing creativity with life storytelling to intentionally destabilize the reader's expectations of historical accuracy. Her unreliable poetic "I" emphasizes emotion to touch on universal experiences of invisibility and vulnerability, as opposed to relying on the accurate recall of facts to legitimate her political critiques. The specter of Rigoberta Menchú and the *testimonio* debates loom to show a contrasting paradigm that uses hybridity of genre to more effectively represent an intersectional identity traversing physical, personal, and textual borders. As a Central American in the U.S., Chinchilla has time and space to process her trauma, in conjunction with the trauma of those who preceded her, many years later in a new country. In so doing, her poetic meditations attempt to forge alliances with other Latinx thinkers and writers who have existed in similar borderlands. Deckman shows

us the way in which ethnic Americans caught in liminality poetically contend with themes of fragmentation and displacement in the American diaspora. The poetic testimonial, thus, becomes a soft archive capable of storing and recalling migrant experiences.

10 Throughout these first three essays, we curate close readings that evaluate testimonials as their own archives recording the stories of individuals and community contending with civil conflict. To round up our exploration of testimonials in the Americas, we choose to conclude with an essay that takes a more critical approach towards the market and social machinations facilitating testimonial disclosure and reception. In Orly Lael Netzer's "Material Weapons: Paratext, Ethics, and Testimony in Carmen Aguirre's *Something Fierce*" the author explores the way in which the *Canada Reads* literary game show impacted the reception of Carmen Aguirre's *Something Fierce: Memoirs of a Revolutionary Daughter* (2014). Aguirre, an exiled Chilean opposed to Pinochet's rule, discloses her experience of escape, migration, and resettlement in Canada. Like Chahinian, Reimer, and Deckman, Netzer is invested in reading Aguirre's testimonial as a thread weaving together communal narratives concerning the political machinations resulting in displacement. Yet, because of the way in which the author and her book were denounced on the *Canada Reads* program, Netzer is just as interested in investigating the way in which testimonials can be co-opted as propaganda to push an external agenda. As the guests on *Canada Reads* debated whether Aguirre was a freedom fighter or a terrorist, Netzer highlights the precarious role of the testimonial writer who must tread this tightrope between mobilization of her story for social justice or weaponization as political propaganda. Nevertheless, Aguirre achieves this by not only grounding her testimonial in history and personal experience, but also by asserting her agency as a testifying subject. Ultimately, what becomes clear throughout this final investigation of our project is the importance of the "testimonial transactions" that take place between author and reader (Whitlock, *Postcolonial* 142). Testimonials can be highly mediated and whether they are weapons of propaganda or human rights testimonials, they cannot serve as the be-all, end-all that readers expect. The onus is on them to recognize these works for what they are: narratives of resistance that cope with displacement, exile, loss, and conflict throughout the process of resettlement, migration, and storytelling.

11 Despite their rich intersections, the narratives about migration to the Americas and hemispheric, "domestic" testimonial literary innovations have been approached as distinct canons and even distinct fields. We hope that you will find that our special issue places these works into a unified constellation that allows enhanced understanding of contemporary testimonial practices of witness, dialogue, listening, and place-making in the Americas.

Notes

[1] In order to amplify the contemporary Chicana and Latina feminist writing practices of *testimonio*, we choose to italicize this key term throughout this issue. We turn particularly to the approaches of the Latina Feminist Group (2001) and Dolores Delgado Bernal and her colleagues (2006, 2015).

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Biography

Dr. Leila Moayeri Pazargadi is an Associate Professor of English at Nevada State College, teaching composition, postcolonial literature, life writing, ethnic American literature, and Middle Eastern literature courses. She received her Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature with a certification in Gender Studies from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2012. Her research focuses on Middle Eastern women writers producing autobiographical material in fiction and nonfiction after 9/11, which also includes scholarship on the visual forms of comics, in addition to Persian photography of the Qajar era. In 2020, she was a Visiting Scholar at UCLA's Center for Near Eastern Studies, researching Middle Eastern women's memoirs for her upcoming monograph: *Mosaics of Exiled Identity: Reading Middle Eastern Women's Memoirs from Across the Diaspora*.

The Space in Between: Overlapping Narratives of Arrival and Departure in Armenian-American Literary and Visual Arts

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Abstract Having fled Lebanon during the Civil War of 1975–1990, New Jersey-based author, Vehanoush Tekian, the LA-based experimental filmmaker, Hrayr Eulmessekian, and LA-based photographer, Ara Madzounian return to Beirut as a figurative repository of layered trauma. In Tekian's prose and poetry, *Family Tree* (1997), *Of Nourishment and the Abyss* (2000) and D*ispersion Poems* (2017), in Eulmessekian's film *Bruitage* (2006), and in Madzounian's *Birds Nest: A Photographic Essay of Bourj Hammoud* (2015), Beirut is presented as an aporia of migration, a space that simultaneously serves as a place of becoming and a place of rupture for Armenian diasporic life. Turning to the term "permanently temporary," coined by anthropologist Joanne Nucho in her discussions of the Armenian district of Beirut, this essay will suggest that the concept of sedentariness rather than mobility, is more apt in framing representations of contemporary Western Armenian migrant narratives produced in the U.S.

Keywords Armenian-American, Armenian Genocide, Beirut, Diaspora, Testimony, Trauma.

Cited Names Nicola Migliorino, Ara Sanjian, Razmig Panossian, Vehanoush Tekian, Hrayr Eulmessekian, Ara Madzounian, Joanne Nucho, Khachig Tölölyan, Michel de Certeau, Hagop Gulludjian, Krikor Beledian, Raffi Adjemian, Marc Augé

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1 Our understanding of trauma is generally rooted in temporal dimensions that negotiate between an event's moment of rupture and its belated revivifications. Discussions of testimony and its demands on the surviving witness are often framed within the tension between the event's disassimilation within the symbolic order and its belated experience. Through the lens of Caruthian trauma theory, for instance, an event is seen as traumatic insofar as it is not understood by the survivor in the midst of the experience and, therefore, relived belatedly. While the location of the trauma's revivification can be situated in a geographical elsewhere, multidisciplinary critical studies of post-catastrophe cultural production often place the emphasis of their analysis on the temporal gap rather than the spatial one. In the works of Armenian-American artists and writers, who fled Lebanon during the Civil War of 1975-1990, trauma is defined in spatial terms. The city of Beirut becomes the site that makes testimony possible due to its ability to accept overlapping narratives of displacement.

2 Having hosted the refugee camps that received the survivors of the Armenian genocide at the turn of the twentieth century, Beirut emerged in the Armenian diaspora's cultural imaginary as a space of survival in exile. Following the 1915 genocide,[1] survivors were dispersed worldwide, with the largest concentration in the Middle East, namely Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt. By the mid-1920s, around 40,000 Armenian refugees had arrived in Lebanon (Sanjian 154), a number which would grow to about 180,000 by the 1970s (Migliorino 145). Lebanon's religious, educational, and citizenship policies under the French Mandate and the subsequent secularized state ensured conditions of survival for the Armenian refugees and afforded them a life without fear of discrimination or assimilation, as was the case for survivors in Western communities like that of France or the U.S. Within this structure, community institutions like the Armenian church or the rapidly growing day-school network functioned autonomously, and the survivor population had citizenship rights, which were granted by a 1925 decree (Migliorino 55). Having hailed from different vilayets in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian refugees comprised a regionally, culturally, and linguistically diverse population (Sanjian 154). Yet the crammed living quarters in the camps and their surrounding neighborhoods collapsed the spatial and cultural difference among survivors. Now living in close proximity with people of varying backgrounds, the survivors' current exilic condition and the genocidal violence that had spawned it became the shared identity trait that both forged a new sense of collective belonging and challenged their past regional loyalties. In Lebanon and in many other diasporic communities, therefore, post-genocide survival was marked in spatial terms that entailed the reconciliation of lost native land with the reconfigured regional belonging on foreign lands.

3 Historians like Nicola Migliorino, Ara Sanjian, and Razmig Panossian have argued that the unique conditions that allowed for favorable, physical survival in Lebanon also enabled the cultivation of Armenian culture in exile. Lebanon was where survivors found safety and subsequently, it became the site where the historical violence of genocide was processed and collectively memorialized. The nonrestrictive regulatory framework of the emergent country that provided protection for the refugees had peripheral effects. It permitted Armenian educational and cultural institutions to flourish and to establish strategies of cultural preservation. By the 1960s, Beirut was regarded as the Armenian diaspora's intellectual center, the epicenter of Western Armenian's cultural revival. In conversation with a transnational network of Armenian diasporic communities, Lebanon's intellectual elite organized themselves around newspapers, literary magazines, publishing houses, printing presses, schools, language academies, theater troupes and other cultural organizations. They initiated efforts to standardize the Western Armenian language, produced textbooks to be used in K-12 schools across the diaspora, anthologized Western Armenian literature, and founded Armenology programs in higher education institutions that focused on training a new generation of teachers, editors, and writers[2]. In other words, Beirut emerged as the nucleus of the diaspora's political, intellectual, and literary activity[3]. Moreover, through its centralizing and canon-making efforts, it positioned itself as the continuation of the pre-genocide literary tradition and framed its literary production in national terms (Chahinian 281).

4 When Lebanon's civil war broke out in 1975, it not only affected the vibrant local Armenian community, but it also changed the composition of the transnationally linked Armenian diaspora. In addition to the internal displacement of Armenians in Lebanon, the large exodus and migration to Western countries weakened Beirut's centrality and created new diasporic centers of Armenian cultural life. Yet, for many writers and artists who fled Lebanon during the war, Beirut continued to have a localizing effect on their art. For many Armenians, the city which was once a temporary safe refugee-haven had cultivated attachments that were rooted in a fixed locale rather than in ideas of transitory mobility. In their contemporary works, New Jersey-based author, Vehanoush Tekian, the LA-based experimental filmmaker, Hrayr Eulmessekian, and LA-based photographer, Ara Madzounian return to Beirut as a figurative repository of layered trauma. In Tekian's prose and poetry, *Family Tree* (1997), *Of Nourishment and the Abyss* (2000) and *Dispersion Poems* (2017), in Eulmessekian's film *Bruitage* (2006), and in Madzounian's *Birds Nest: A Photographic Essay of Bourj Hammoud* (2015), Beirut is presented as an aporia of migration, a space that simultaneously serves as a place of becoming and a place of rupture for Armenian diasporic life. Turning

to the term "permanently temporary," coined by anthropologist Joanne Nucho in her discussions of the Armenian district of Beirut, this essay suggests that the concept of sedentariness, rather than mobility, is more apt in framing representations of contemporary Western Armenian narratives produced in the U.S. by immigrant artists. My understanding of sedentariness lies in an exilic community's potential to create a localized space. As Khachig Tölölyan has argued, the logic of sedentary, which is the basis for the concept of indigeneity, often gets dismissed in studies of diaspora communities for fear of it being linked to destructive forms of nationalism. However, it is central to the formation of diasporas that often cultivate local attachments in addition to their attachment to lost lands.

5 In the case of Lebanon, looking at informal Armenian settlements in what later became the municipality of Bourj Hammoud in Beirut, Joanne Nucho examines the Armenian refugees' collective desire for permanence in the host country during the years immediately following the genocide and the role of popular histories that authenticate spaces of belonging. Her book, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*, which argues that sectarian belonging in Lebanon is negotiated through property claims, suggests that the Armenian case entails a process of forging dwellings which she calls "permanently temporary," referring to the temporary property rights the neighborhood's inhabitants had received from the municipality. Speaking of Arakadz, an Armenian refugee settlement in the municipality of Bourj Hammoud, she says, "while not necessarily protected from the possibility of eventual destruction, [it] circulates as an image of nostalgia, an important locus of collective memory for Lebanese Armenians" (52). In contrast, popular histories deem Sanjak, a refugee camp with similarly temporary property rights, a backward space, not worthy of living in perpetuity (or permanence) in Lebanese-Armenians' collective imagination. This drastically different framing of Sanjak, one of the few surviving refugee camps, in contrast to Arakadz, seen as a settlement, demonstrates the Armenian community's need to territorially ground their diasporic identity in Lebanon.

6 Arakadz's preferential standing situates Lebanese Armenians' sense of belonging within claims of the sedentary. This form of belonging does not necessarily signal rootedness. Rather, it recognizes the transnational fluidity of diasporic belonging, while embracing a sense of permanence attached to the dwelling place. Referring to the Armenians of Lebanon – and more broadly of the Middle East – as an example of territorialized diasporic community, Khachig Tölölyan discusses the fading relevance of place in diasporic communities, which are increasingly becoming more mobile and more transnational. For Tölölyan, this dwindling commitment to place is also reflected in studies of diaspora, where the metaphor of global space reigns and favors concepts of

migratory mobility, deterritorialization, and cultural hybridity. He pleads not to let the impact of mobility "obscure the role of place, of 'sedentariness,' of reterritorialization and of the institutions that link and mediate between the local sites and attachments of diasporas" (Tölölyan 141). He warns that this kind of oversight in American diasporic discourse could lead to the neglect of important areas of study. In the case of the Armenian diaspora, for instance, he argues that it could lead to the "neglect of the persistence, in the US today, of attachments to place and identity that developed elsewhere and that still retain a certain coherence" (Tölölyan 144).

7 In the works of Tekian, Eulmessekian, and Madzounian, that "elsewhere" is Beirut. While they live, produce, and publish in the United States, their works represent the sedentary attachment to their former dwelling place, a diasporic space itself. Here, the distinction I make between place and space draws from Michel de Certeau's proposed differentiation which understands place as a distinct, stable location as opposed to space, which is composed of the "intersections of mobile elements" (De Certeau 117). Therefore, it is the situational operations and interactions that create space, or in Certeau's words, "[i]n short, space is a practiced place" (117). Whereas Tekian, Eulmessekian, and Madzounian recognize Beirut as a diasporic space, organized and dictated by the ideologies and practices of diaspora institutions, their works more profoundly represent Beirut as place, highlighting stable and sedentary attachments to distinct locales within it.

The Written Word: Diasporic Attachment in Tekian's Poetry and Prose

8 In her short story, "Ashkharh me ew kani me diezerk" [A World and a Few Universes] Vehanoush Tekian describes a New Jersey party scene where the autobiographical narrator encounters an old classmate from Beirut, occasioning a series of reminiscences that center around mutually shared acquaintances and an inventory of their diasporic paths following the Lebanese Civil War. Having settled in the States shortly before the narrator, Silva, the narrator's interlocutor, advises her to forget about the nebulous notion of homeland. She says, "Forget this talk of nation. The homeland-complex has tired our soul. We're Beirut-born. There was nothing wrong with Lebanon. It was a homeland, period. And what's not to like about America?" (*Dohmadzar* 251) Silva's comments refer to the multifariousness of homeland and the multiplicity of migratory patterns that constitute Armenian diaspora communities. In the case of the narrator, for instance, homeland can refer to her birthplace Lebanon, the birthplace of her grandparents in Western Armenia (now part of Turkey), the then-newly formed Republic of Armenia, or her newly acquired host country. Yet, the tension Silva draws our attention to is more explicitly between, on the one hand, an ideological, constructed

homeland that places diasporic understanding within a nationalist framework and, on the other, the territorialized community in Lebanon, where the narrator locates her loss. For Silva, the ideological homeland burdens diasporic Armenians with a need to create attachments to place, forcing their itinerant lives to be perpetually marked by loss; Whereas for the story's narrator, it is the very attachment to place that frees the diasporic Armenian of homeland's ideological burdens.

9 In the poetry and prose writings of New Jersey-based writer, Vehanoush Tekian, the narrative voice is most often autobiographical[4]. Like the narrator of "A World and a Few Universes," Tekian moved from Lebanon to the States in 1978, at the age of 30. Written in the stateless, Western Armenian language, Tekian's works, produced in the United States, frequently return to Beirut as the site of loss that entails a double rendering of rupture. Beirut is the beloved city the author was forced to abruptly leave behind due to the country's civil war. Beirut is also the city that, following World War I, received the author's displaced grandparents, who were survivors of the Armenian genocide. Tekian's fascination with these overlapping narratives of arrival and departure, localized in Beirut, drive the quest for home in her writing. As both a Lebanese-Armenian writer and an Armenian-American writer, she asks: What does home come to mean for a displaced people? How is home redefined, regained after an expulsion from a physical space on indigenous lands? And ultimately, does a secondary expulsion solidify or indefinitely nullify the possibility for home?

10 Having started her literary career in 1968, Tekian belongs to the generation of post-genocide Western Armenian writers who emerged as a result of the Middle Eastern Armenian diaspora's cultural renaissance of the 1950s. As such, she comes from a decades-long tradition of diaspora literature that dwells on the notion of home in exile, often reconfiguring it as language or as cultural practice. Evading these symbolic representations of home, Tekian focuses instead on the tangible elements of home, as a structural haven, as house. In this context, the violence of genocide and war is imagined through the destruction of edifice. Loss of one's dwelling place appears congruent with the loss of life, highlighting displacement as the survivor's characteristic feature. In her autobiographical short story, "Tsugn er loghum vjid chrum" [The Fish Swam in Clear Waters], from the collection *Dohmadzar* [Family Tree] (1997), she writes, "It's the house that enters through man, and not the man who enters a house. Oh Father, how many houses will you have to lose in order to find your place. Here, the table was plentiful, across from Ararat" (65-66). This lamentation on loss of houses comes after several passages that describe the bombing of Tekian's family home in West Beirut. In these sections, Tekian, assuming the narrative voice, recalls and recounts arriving at the scene of the aftermath, walking through the ashes and debris, and assessing the catastrophic damage.

Amid descriptions that identify burnt objects, the narrative dwells on the few items like silver trays and water jugs that Tekian's grandparents had carried with them on the deportation route from their native home in Talas, Turkey. While the first sentence of this lament focuses on the transportability of home as an abstract category that resides within a person, the second sentence binds the idea of home to a house, a place, and brings our attention back to edifice. The Beirut house, now burnt to the ground, evokes the memory of a previous family house, similarly lost to a catastrophe. The reference to the plentiful table, marked as "here," both confuses the reader and compounds the two references of homes lost. Set across from "Ararat," the mountain that serves as an Armenian national symbol left on the Turkish side of the border and overlooking Armenia's current capital, Yerevan, the plentiful table that the narrator refers to can have dual locales. "Here" can be either Beirut or Talas. In both cases, the figure of Mt. Ararat that is said to reign over the table, a family's main congregation space in a home, is imagined. Mt. Ararat could not be seen from either Talas or Beirut, therefore, represents a symbol of Armenian national belonging. In other words, the passage presents the homeliness of Tekian's house in Beirut as being akin to their family house in their natal lands, challenging the itinerary of loss often associated with exile and hinting at the possibility of diasporic rootedness.

11 In many of Tekian's poems about Beirut, structural properties of a house are framed within a language that suggests indigeneity. Repetitive imagery of walls ground the narrator's dwelling place to land, while images of doors connect memories of home to their surrounding natural environment. In poems that refer to displacement, the narrator remembers the lost home as being rooted in native lands. In the 1993 poem "Hors atore" [My Father's Chair], originally published in *Pazmadzup Ashkharh* [Tempestuous World], Tekian writes, "The walls have collapsed of the city that the eagles fled / The shutters have been plucked, the native trees have melted / And the pleasure of memory wanders from land to land like a wounded bird" (*Spiwrkakir* 33). In this poem about loss and erasure, the narrator describes her childhood home as deserted, within an equally emptied city, destroyed by bombardment. Beyond structural damage evoked by images of collapsed walls, the narrator draws our attention to melted, native trees, emphasizing their indigenous belonging to that space. Similarly, in "Mama" [Momma], a 2000 poem originally published in *Snunt ew Antunt* [Of Nourishment and the Abyss], Tekian grounds her lost home in a seemingly indigenous locale. She writes, "Although the tall chimney walls of that ancestral house / collapsed to the ground, / In their place, there are now pillars of light and memory / Because you were mother, omnipotent" (*Spiwrkakir* 63). In this poem dedicated to her mother, Tekian once again conjures an image of collapsed walls, only to celebrate their resurrection in

memories of happy experiences that those walls once witnessed. Here, by referring to the lost house as an ancestral home, Tekian frames her former dwelling place as a space of generational transference and inherited belonging. As such, its loss and her own exile from it are seen as an expulsion from a place of native, timeless attachment.

12 Tekian's emphasis on edifice and attachment to territory develops through the imposing imagery of walls and doors. Walls defend, doors invite. Walls witness and archive, doors release. In Tekian's poetry, the imagery of doors connects the lives contained within the frame of walls to their surrounding natural or urban habitat, reminding us that the sense of concrete rootedness we associate with houses is ultimately ephemeral. In "Moreninere" [Blackberry Bushes] originally published in *Snunt ew Antunt* (2000), Tekian writes, "But there no longer is a wellspring / To wash ourselves with cold water / Nor a thorny Blackberry bush carrying the songs of the village sun / Nor a door, where we would wait to receive the lavash / So that we write with our purple hands that had untangled the many knots of life" (*Spiwrkakir* 32). This poem locates the lost home in a village town of Lebanon where the poet's family used to spend their summers. In it, rather than seeing an enumeration of objects enclosed in the spatial confines of a house, we encounter an outdoor setting marked by natural elements like a beloved blackberry bush, the sun, and a wellspring. In contrast to the fixed setting of indoor spaces described within other poems that highlight the archival quality of walls and homes, here, the environment described is dynamic and seasonal. The door of the house connects the narrator and her family to both nature and the social fabric of the community that lies beyond the walls of their home. This active environment challenges the permanence of a house and hints to the transitory nature of belonging. In many ways, the poem suggests that all attachments to place are inherently impermanent, despite the forced conditions of displacement caused by the civil war. It reminds us that within a bigger picture of life on this earth, rootedness is temporary and perhaps even more desirable for it.

13 Many of Tekian's autobiographical short stories begin in present time New Jersey and switch back to the author's past in Beirut. In these fleeting passages about her life in the United States, the author addresses divorce, single parenthood, homosexuality, AIDS, feminism[5]. In Tekian's prose, they are presented through brief storylines that recount everyday encounters of the author's life in New Jersey and New York. Many of the Beirut sections, on the other hand, lack narrative progression as their organizing logic. Rather, they are photographic descriptions of the past. The story called "Dohmadzar" [Family Tree], which gives the collected volume its title, begins by locating the narrative on a very specific site: an attempt of mapping, but on a multidimensional space full of sights, sounds, and the bustle of people. Tekian

writes, "Perched atop the hot plateau of Beirut, this terrifying landmass is called Fern Shbbek National Cemetery, where the playground noise of the next-door Arab boys and the skeletons of the neighborhoods' leaves spread like a net, embracing the tombstones" (*Dohmadzar* 265). Tekian's description of an Armenian cemetery, referred in "national" terms by Armenians of Lebanon, has a grounding effect. Lebanon, once a temporary refugee stop for Armenian survivors of the genocide, is now home to an Armenian community territorially bound to its land through the dead. Having buried their elders in their new home, the Armenians of Lebanon are presented as having left their indelible imprint on the host country. This powerful image of integration is amplified by the proximity and overlap of next-door playground, where Arab boys play, their vibrant sounds overcoming the silence of the graves. The Armenian community's spatial integration is thus paralleled by their social integration.

14 Often, in similarly conjuring images of Lebanon, Tekian presents us with drone-like views of the various neighborhoods of Beirut, drawing up geographical musings in descriptive language. In the same story mentioned above, she momentarily pulls the narrative back to her present time in New Jersey, in order to remind us that the images in the story are part of her memory work. And before continuing with her visual journey of Beirut, she says, "They had created a sub-world within the small world of Lebanon. The tricolor, the skulls of the martyrs, the songs of Sasun, Sose Mayrig, the soldiers of Antranig were symbols, with which we spoke also with song, and partly anew" (292). Here, the pronoun "they" has a distancing effect, clearly marking Beirut as an elsewhere and reminding the reader that the narrative is unfolding from a place of memory. Despite the interpolation of the narrator's present time, the remembrance of the Armenian community's territorial belonging in Lebanon once again locates the narrative in spatial terms. While many of the national symbols identified in this passage refer to intangible icons like heroes (Sose Mayrig and Antranig) or cultural practices like the singing of patriotic songs, we still see the image's attachment to specificities of Beirut as a locale. The "skulls of the martyrs" for instance, refers to the memorial chapel dedicated to the victims of the genocide, built next to the main church in Antelias, Beirut that houses the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia. The shrine exhibits skulls and remains of genocide victims, collected from deportation routes in the Syrian desert.

15 Lebanon's centrality to Tekian's poetry and prose written in New Jersey is marked by overlapping narratives of survival and departure. The trauma of genocide's displacement foreshadows and haunts the secondary exile caused by the civil war. Like photographs, images of the author's past in Lebanon appear in descriptive terms, rather than as part of a linear narrative sequence

or plot. Instead of action, we get scenarios, snaps of events or conversations, painted from memory. In a special issue of the Beirut-based literary magazine *Pakine* dedicated to Tekian, Hagop Gulludjian suggests that in many respects, Tekian's work is reminiscent of Krikor Beledian's (another Armenian writer from Lebanon now living in France) work, in its suggestion that Western Armenian is an "unpeopled language" and can only produce photographic retellings of the past that center on the "teller" as individual (Gulludjian 14). Raffi Adjemian similarly describes Tekian's work as exposing the distancing of the language from its people, its listeners, its consumers, suggesting that Tekian's autobiographical writings speak inward, to themselves, rather than outward to an audience. He writes, "In one word, day and night we mourn the detachment of the language from ourselves, accounting it to our circumstances, whereas it's us. We're the ones intentionally distancing ourselves from the language, systematically renouncing its future. In reality, herein lies the Diaspora's true tragedy. Tekian puts an end to the great lie" (Adjemian 124). Centered on herself and her memories, Tekian produces works that have a reflexive quality and speak to themselves. Her insistence on writing in Western Armenian suggests a type of diasporic literary production dependent on recycling: one that looks backward, but one that is also located in an elsewhere. In this way, Tekian's American publications reveal the author's attachment to Lebanon, both as a place of arrival and departure, and depict its Armenian community as territorially bound to that land.

The Moving Image: Diasporic Attachment in Eulmessekian's *Bruitage*

16 Hrayr Eulmessekian's 2006 film ***Bruitage*** similarly depicts sedentary attachment to Lebanon, highlighting the tension between rootedness and mobility inherent to diasporic life. Like Tekian, Eulmessekian was born in Beirut and moved to the United States in 1984 and completed both undergraduate and graduate studies at the San Francisco Art Institute. Currently living in Los Angeles, Eulmessekian produces films and other multi-media works that question diasporic identity and transnational belonging. Having witnessed the first nine years of the Lebanese civil war, the filmmaker often imagines the violence of war both as an origin and an endgame for Armenian diasporic life and cyclically returns to it as a mode of rewriting the past accordingly.

17 With a running time of 58 minutes, ***Bruitage*** zooms across a series of black-and-white photographs at a slow, deliberate pace, in what the filmmaker has referred to as an "exploration of pictorial backgrounds of old family photographs" taken before the civil war (ehrayr.com). Throughout the film, the camera eludes any visible foreground, making it difficult to decipher the context of the family photographs. Instead, the viewer is invited to locate the photograph's content in the grainy close-ups of each image's backdrop.

This focused invitation has a grounding effect. The camera stretches over still images of outdoor spaces that include the soil of the ground, wild grass, rocky terrains, the beach, and concrete structures in what seems to be a construction site or an incomplete settlement community. The stillness of the image in contrast to the slowly moving camera ties our gaze to the landscapes being depicted. In the opening sequence, the camera pans over clustered concrete houses, stacked one behind the other, and some left incomplete. The structures are empty with dark window holes that gape back at the viewer. Themselves unoccupied, they seem to occupy the land, hinting at the potential of rootedness for newly forming communities. When we finally see people in the frame, they appear in dark silhouettes, indistinguishable as individuals. Moreover, they are shown as walking through a door along a concrete wall that stretches across the image and divides a field into two. It is not clear whether the people are arriving or departing. In contrast to the concrete edifice that forms a wall of arbitrary separation, the still bodies, captured in motion, seem perpetually in transit, stuck in this liminal space. They are both attached to territory and itinerant, just like diasporic bodies.

18 In the absence of the foreground of the family photographs, the viewer is also invited to depend on the audio track of the film in search of context. Matching the visual content, the sound effects of the opening sequence projects sounds that signal outdoor spaces, particularly in nature. We hear the chirping of birds, the buzzing of flies, the crow of a rooster, rain and the sound of waves. The quiet stillness of the photographs amplifies the calculated disconnect between image and sound and reminds the viewer to process the two tracks (the visual and the aural) as simultaneous narratives rather than integrated ones. After the appearance of silhouettes in the photographs, the audio track begins to reveal tidbits of conversation. In these instances, just as the faces of the people in the photographs are out of reach, so are the words of the languages being spoken. The spoken word comes to us muffled, layered by noises and voices from multiple directions, and often dubbed by the sound of a musical instrument or cars honking or driving in the distance. Although we can recognize a mix of languages, Armenian and Arabic mainly, we cannot determine exactly what is being said. The audio track of the film ***Bruitage*** is precisely what its French title suggests – the artificial reconstruction of natural noises and sounds that accompany the action in films, television, or theater. In the filmmaker's own words,

> the audio tracks, looped and laid down as background noise tracks, also of Lebanon, have been retrieved from online sources or existing home video tracks, which are played and re-recorded on open microphones along with the room tones and ambient noise of the different spaces and surroundings of our former home in San Francisco. (Hrayr Eulmessekian YouTube Channel)

19 The convergence of these incidental sounds or background noises and the still shots of the moving image on the screen provide the conceptual framework of the film. Ultimately, with its simultaneous progression of visual and auditory background content, ***Bruitage*** asks us to confront the deep background of family portraits and family histories of diasporic life.

20 "Deep background" is a journalistic term referring to information offered by a source that may not be included in the article but that nevertheless enhances the journalist's understanding of an event. In ***Bruitage***, Eulmessekian strips away everything but the deep background of family photographs. In doing so, he helps his viewers arrive at the transnational context of diasporic familial experiences and diasporic cultural memory. What we see and hear on the screen are the subtractions that diasporic memory makes in order to preserve that which it calls Armenian. In the case of Lebanon, a place of temporary refuge-turned-home for Armenians, sedentary attachments are often subtracted for the sake of preserving the mythical potency of the original homeland lost. The "deep background" in the telling of one's diasporic self is the tension between temporariness and permanence that characterizes a diasporic space and between sedentariness and mobility that marks diasporic belonging.

21 The last image of the film presents a panoramic view of Beirut, as seen from a rooftop of a building. It is the only photograph of the film from which the camera zooms ***outward***, rather than simply moving across it. In other words, it is the only photograph of the film that is revealed as a complete image. Here, in this totalizing view, we see the whole of the city, represented through the merger of its many walls, in the form of closely-knit buildings. The collection of walls no longer signals a kind of anthropological place, which celebrates indigenous belonging or attachment to land, like in the earlier sequences of the film. Instead, what we see is a city space, an animated version of all the places we have seen before. The imagined moving bodies that lie on its streets below present the city in motion, and, as Michel de Certeau would argue, as space rather than place. As the image zooms out from background to foreground, the film's emphasis shifts from place– as defined by territorial attachment, to space– as constructed through quotidian cultural practices. The aerial view of the final scene is accompanied by background sounds that, at first, resemble distant city noises. In fact, the final audio track presents a layering of all previous tracks, now playing in reverse, suggesting a shift from sounds that depicted lived experiences to those that depict memories. The city, first as place and then as space, is seen as fleeting and impermanent. Moreover, the audio track projects a sound of an airplane taking off, leaving us, the viewer, stranded mid-air, in what Marc Augé has called a non-place. Arguing that late-capitalist phenomena produce non-places, Augé explains

that in contrast to a place, "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (77-78). For him, means of transport like aircrafts, trains and road vehicles host parenthetical experiences and are forms of non-places. By ending *Bruitage* – an otherwise formal meditation on the sedentary – in a non-place, Eulmessekian suggests that diasporic attachment to place entails both feelings of having left and always leaving. Having hosted the arrival and departure of Armenians, Beirut, for the LA-based filmmaker, exemplifies the temporary permanence of a diasporic community.

The Photograph: Diasporic Attachment in Ara Madzounian's *Birds Nest*

22 Like Tekian and Eulmessekian, Ara Madzounian moved to Los Angeles as result of the Lebanese civil war in 1975. *Birds Nest: A Photographic Essay of Bourj Hammoud* exhibits a collection of photographs taken between 2008 and 2009, upon the photographer's return to his hometown to visit his terminally ill brother, to whom the book is dedicated. In it, Madzounian documents the neighborhoods of Bourj Hammoud at the brink of dramatic changes to their demographic landscape due to the rapid migration of the Armenian population. With the looming threat of the once-vibrant community's demise, his camera captures the almost mythical regard with which Bourj Hammoud is revered as a place of origin for diasporic belonging. Having emerged out of the refugee camps near the eastern port of Beirut, the district of Bourj Hammoud holds a unique place in the history of post-genocide dispersion and in the making of a collective Armenian diasporic identity. Often referred to as the "Armenian quarter" or the "Armenian ghetto" of Beirut, the small plot of land served as a site where lost Armenian villages and towns were resurrected in the form of renamed neighborhoods in the aftermath of 1915. The vibrant community forged in the following decades allows Bourj Hammoud to be read as a metaphor for the possibility of "Little Armenias." Indeed, in the pre-civil war years, Bourj Hammoud was the epicenter of nation-building in the diaspora, where new myths, street culture, schools, churches and theaters flourished.

23 In *Birds Nest*,[6] many of the photographs and the places they feature are presented as interchangeable or indistinguishable. While the images demonstrate the centrality of micro-neighborhoods to Bourj Hammoud, the photographs themselves are untitled, though an index in the back of the book names their district origins. A satellite image of Bourj Hammoud prefaces the collection, and the series of photographs that follows maintains the aerial view, while zooming in further and further. This approach offers the viewer the opportunity to peer and peek. Through the photographer's lens, the viewer stands at a threshold and looks into stores, bakeries, and restaurants or peeks

at balconies and rooftops. In these liminal spaces, thresholds are crossed from the opposite direction as well: the contents of buildings always seem to be spilling into the streets. Sidewalks are seen occupied by grocery pallets filled with fruits, vegetables or bread and the building inhabitants playing backgammon or eating sandwiches on plastic chairs and makeshift tables.

24 While for the city's inhabitants the borderline between indoor and outdoor spaces is blurred in this way, a clear demarcation blocks the viewer's gaze as the camera lens attempts to "peer in." The residents of Bourj Hammoud often look defiantly at the camera, challenging the outsider's gaze. In a shawarma stand, for instance, a young man, captured in profile view, prepares a sandwich while behind him, five men stand and stare at the camera questioningly. Only one of the men in the back is an employee of that establishment, marked by his uniform that matches that of the occupied cook. The others appear to be customers, residents of the district, safeguarding their local spot with their cold stares. In another photograph, an old man sits on a low chair in front of a grocery store, which looks to be a family business. Captured in profile view, he is seen busy sorting out grape leaves used to roll an Armenian dish called "sarma." Next to him, a young man bends over to fill a crate with black olives. With a tilted head and raised eyebrows, he looks straight into the camera with a challenging stare. In another example, the camera peers into a shoe repair shop, where a cobbler is busy at work. His back is to a wall, aged with chipped paint and covered with pictures of Jesus and Mother Mary. Two bookshelves frame the picture, one filled with cassette tapes, the other with faded books. In the center, the cobbler sits and stares at the camera over his glasses, which are lowered on his nose. His hands are busy with work. Like the grocery store worker, the cobbler does not grace the presence of the camera with a pause from his work. On the contrary, he regards the camera as an intrusion and stares at the lens in contempt. Whether it be a young mechanic staring at the camera from beneath a car, a priest conducting service at a cemetery or a child walking with his grandmother on the sidewalk, the residents of Bourj Hammoud stare back at the camera, defying our gaze. We are foreigners, uninvited flaneurs in their midst. Whether guided by a sense of betrayal they feel toward those who have left them behind or a sense of duty to protect their communal attachments to the district, those captured in the *Birds Nest* draw a clear line between insider and outsider.

25 The exclusive sense of communal belonging demarcated by the residents' uninviting gaze seems to be less motivated by ethnic homogeneity and more by attachment to place. In other words, the outsider is defined as she who is from an elsewhere. In fact, while we know that Bourj Hammoud is predominantly populated by Armenians, in the photographs, we cannot distinguish between the Arab and Armenian residents of the district. Territorial markers are

what reveal the neighborhoods as Armenian diasporic spaces. In one image, an elderly woman clad in elegant attire and adorned by excess faux-bijoux captures our gaze as she's seen crossing an intersection. In the background, we read the name of a corner shoe store called Talin, a feminine Armenian name, written on the storefront in French, Arabic and Armenian. Billboards, signs, and storefront names in general appear in multiple languages throughout the photographs. In fact, Arabic, French, English, and Armenian are mingled together so seamlessly that they eventually appear as interchangeable languages in the backdrop of the shots. "Service for All Cars: Zaven Avakian" reads a sign in English in the background of a shot that captures car traffic at a busy intersection. "Dead Sea, Jordan River, first-rate hotels, tours, breakfast and dinner included $315" says a travel poster in Armenian. Referencing the commemoration date of the Armenian genocide, "24 April" reads a black-and-red graffiti, painted on one of the background walls of a photograph that features a street vendor whose cart is marked by Arabic letters. In the background of a photograph centered on converging powerlines, a tricolor Armenian flag hangs from a balcony, next to a row of hanging laundry. Or a traditional triangular dome of Armenian church peers through an opening in an image that captures the contrast between an old and a newly constructed building. Revealed in the photographs' background, the Armenian community's presence is seen as being attached to edifice and landmarks, highlighting the possibility of sedentary belonging in Little Armenias.

26 The photographs in Madzounian's *Birds Nest* are accompanied by a collection of essays, one of which is written by the filmmaker Eulmessekian, who calls Bourj Hammoud "a synecdoche for the diaspora" (133). As an example of an organized diaspora district, Bourj Hammoud serves as a miniature model of Lebanon, as a host country for a territorial diaspora community, which in turn speaks to the broader diasporic narrative of the region. In one of her short stories, Vehanoush Tekian writes, "There once was a time when the world was different, when Lebanon was the world" (*Dohmadzar* 25). Lebanon's world-making potential for survivors of the Armenian genocide is captured in the works of Tekian, Eulmessekian, and Madzounian. For these Armenian-American artists, who left Lebanon during the civil war, Beirut remains the focal point of diasporic locality to be reproduced in art and in writing. Through their works produced and published in the United States, the writer, the filmmaker, and the photographer expose their attachment to a previous diasporic locale and depict territorial belonging as characteristic of diaspora. Lebanon as a site of both arrival and departure captures the dichotomous relationship between the sedentary and the mobile that defines diasporic life and allows diaspora communities to establish, in new places, a relationship that drives toward permanence, however fleeting that may be.

Notes

[1] The Armenian genocide refers to the systematic massacre and deportation of Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire, orchestrated by the Young Turk regime during World War I. An estimated 1.5 million Armenians were killed, and thousands were driven out of their native lands during the years 1915-1923.

[2] The expansive diasporic cultural and literary apparatus in Lebanon focused largely on the preservation of the Western Armenian language. In an effort to consolidate the dispersed Armenian population's identity as an organized diaspora, many intellectuals worked to standardize the Western Armenian language and to posit it against its Eastern Armenian other, used in Soviet Armenia. The mechanism used for this standardization and education project consisted of day schools, which numbered at sixty-three by 1958 (Migliorino 114); numerous printing houses belonging to the Armenian political parties, the Catholicosate, or independent individuals; the publication of textbooks and anthologies like those prepared by Mushegh Ishkhan, Garo Sasuni, and Minas Teoleolian; institutions of higher learning that trained Armenologists and Armenian language educators like Haigazian College, Hamakaying-organized Palandjian College, and the established chair at Saint-Joseph University.

[3] Dispersed Armenians worldwide often organized themselves into diasporic communities by congregating around institutions like churches, schools, or publishing houses. Early centers of intellectual discourse were Boston, New York, and Paris, whereas Aleppo, Cairo, and Jerusalem (with Beirut at the center) rose to prominence in the 1940s. In the long run, cities with Armenian day schools were able to shape themselves into language communities and establish cultural institutions necessary for diaspora-building.

[4] The genres of autobiography and memoir are prevalent in Armenian-North American writing. They were produced in Armenian by first generation immigrants and in English by second generation immigrants. Speaking of a particular kind of autobiographical writing referred to as ethno-biographical texts, Lorne Shirinian writes, "Ethno-autobiography is an attempt to find a voice that does not omit any of the various components of one's identity. This process of returning to or reconnecting with one's past, thereby gaining intercultural knowledge is the author's search for coherence in his life" (87). While much of this tradition focuses on identity issues informed by the tension between the Armenian and American realms of one's self, Tekian's autobiographical writings evade discussions of hybrid identity and locate diasporic belonging in attachments to place.

[5] These topics, though common in American discourse contemporaneous to the work's creation, are generally absent in Western Armenian literature, which has a male-dominated (and often patriarchal) canon.

[6] Birds' Nest, or Trchnots Puyn in Armenian, is a reference to the famous orphanage that received many of the Armenian orphans of the genocide. Located in the old town of Byblos along the Mediterranean shore north of Beirut, the orphanage was run by a Danish missionary named Maria Jacobsen. Today, the house serves as a museum of orphans of the genocide.

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Biography

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Tarfia Faizullah's Poetics of Testimony and Transnational Feminist Praxis

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Abstract As part of a U.S. Fulbright fellowship, the Bengali-American poet Tarfia Faizullah traveled to Bangladesh to interview birangona survivors of sexual violence during the 1972 Bangladesh Liberation War. In her resulting poetry collection, Seam (2015), transnational feminist praxis unites poetry, testimony, ethnography, autobiography & autoethnography to speak alongside, instead of for, the birangona. This essay uses critical close reading to explore the book's suturing of voices, genres, and forms, illustrating how innovative poetics can expand the genre of testimonial while amplifying the power of poetry as part of a transnational (and transformational) feminist practice of solidarity.

Keywords American Poetry, Asian American Poetry, Bangladesh Liberation War, Birangona, Ethnography, Testimony, Transnational Feminism.

Cited Names Tarfia Faizullah

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1 In March of 1971, after months of repression by West Pakistan, East Pakistani (Bengali Muslim) military forces began an armed rebellion. The ensuing civil war between East and West Pakistan resulted in the formation of Bangladesh, furthering the division of the Indian subcontinent along religious lines—a division that had begun with Partition (the formation of India and Pakistan as separate nation-states) in 1947.[1] The bloody Bangladesh Liberation War, also known as the Bangladesh War of Independence, lasted for nine months and resulted in an estimated 300,000 – three million deaths (Zakaria). Pakistani soldiers, fueled by "the terrible deluded logic of racial supremacy," undertook an assimilation-through-forced-miscegenation campaign and systematically raped hundreds of thousands of Bengali women (Kabeer 122)[2]. Later, the survivors of wartime rape were given the title of "birangona" – the Bengali word for "war heroines" – in a clumsy attempt by the Bengali government to acknowledge wartime violence. According to Kabeer, the term was meant to downplay the sexual nature of crimes in order to protect survivors from social ostracization. Sadly, many *birangona* were still rejected by their families. The designation, intended as an honor, ended up being, for many women, a further reminder and continuation of their trauma.

2 In 2010, on a U.S. Fulbright fellowship, the Bengali-American poet Tarfia Faizullah traveled to Bangladesh to interview the *birangona* and record their stories. The author's own past is a part of the history that she traveled to investigate: born in Midland, Texas, Faizullah is the daughter of parents who immigrated to the United States from Bangladesh in 1978 to escape the aftermath of the war. Located at the interstices of poetry, testimony-*testimonio*, ethnography, autobiography, and autoethnography, *Seam* is the resulting product of her fellowship.

3 Transnational feminist work – praxis[4] – is the thread joining *Seam*'s various parts. Transnational feminist praxis is the application of transnational feminism[5], as lived experiences and methodology, into sites of inquiry that include, but are not limited to, intersections of difference; destabilizing the construction of women through patriarchy, the state and national narratives; the female body as a site of memory and trauma, power and resistance; conditions of ambivalence, absence and loss; decolonizing bodies, practices, and states; forging solidarities through differences; and bearing witness. A political project of solidarity that includes scholarship, activism, artistic expression, as well as lived practices of daily life, transnational feminist praxis excavates "multiple, fluid structures of domination which intersect to locate women differently at particular historical conjectures, while at the same time insisting on the dynamic oppositional agency of individuals and collectives and their engagement in 'daily life'" (Mohanty 13). As a form of complex, mediated poetic testimony, *Seam* enacts the kind of feminist life writing Caren

Kaplan has characterized as "'authentic' oral accounts set into writing through hybrid authorial strategies that participates in individual autobiography while utilizing technologies different from conventional first-person Western accounts" (Grewal & Kaplan 147). Faizullah's poems bear witness to historical trauma on a mass scale while simultaneously exploring "what it means to be a South Asian Muslim woman from West Texas" (Carman). In *Seam*, poetry becomes the space for testimonial disclosure and mediation through which Faizullah can show how setting out to bear witness to cultural trauma becomes a testimony to her own self-reckoning. In this way, transnational feminist praxis becomes a poetic practice. This essay explores the book's suturing of voices, genres, and forms, using critical close reading to illustrate how the innovative poetics *Seam* introduces opens testimonial to the visual and palimpsestic, while amplifying the transformative power of poetry as part of a transnational feminist practice.

4 Although a form of testimony, *Seam* does not present a testimonial narrative in the style of an outsider-translator, such as Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, nor an insider-ethnographer such as Victor Montejo; although in rejecting the binary between self and social that long governed ethnographic and autobiographical writing, *Seam* shares characteristics with the Latin American *testimonio* genre, with which both Burgos-Debray and Montejo helped popularize.[6] As testimony, *Seam* is also a work of ethnography. As Ruth Behar reminds us, all forms of witnessing and bearing testimony have "its roots in the ethnographic experience of talking, listening, transcribing, translating, and interpreting" (Behar 162). Drilling down even further, in performing the self-reflexive self, *Seam*'s poems invoke the subgenre of autoethnography. In addressing the multiple cultural dynamics that an individual confronts alongside the personal dynamics of traditional autobiography (Ettorre 2), the book resonates with feminist scholarship which refutes the belief that a single cultural perspective can reveal a set of pre-determined truths.[7] As a work of feminist autoethnography whose form reflects the particular, sphinxian conditions of a borderlands identity,[8] *Seam* brings to mind Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Heather Yeung. At once personal and political, self and other, domestic and transnational, Faizullah's poetry interrogates the uneasy relationship between the act of witnessing and the aesthetics of recording, engaging the questions transnational feminist theorists have raised around the configuration of the space between testimonial and literature, specifically what power relations may be obscured in the aestheticizing of testimonial (Carr, qtd. in Grewal & Kaplan 156). Following Felman and Laub, *Seam* asks: "What is the relation between literature and testimony, between the writer and the witness? What is the relation between the act of witnessing and testifying, and the acts of writing and reading, particular in our era? [...]

what is the relation between narrative and history, between art and memory, between speech and survival?" (Felman and Laub xiii). *Seam* isn't so much an answer to those questions as a performance of them, a series of borderland spaces where the specificity of power relations and instability of ambivalent positionality can be rendered onto the page through poetry's visual qualities and emphasis on form and figurative language.

5 In a series of linked poems all related to her fieldwork with the *birangona*, Faizullah calls attention to her fluctuating position as both the gatherer-curator of others' testimony and as witness to her own personal trauma. The ambivalence of her subject positioning creates (and is created by) her poetic form and style.[9] The poems titled "Instructions for the Interviewer," "Interview with a Birangona," "Interviewer's Note," "The Interviewer Acknowledges Desire," "The Interviewer Acknowledges Shame," and "The Interviewer Acknowledges Grief," use multiple points of view to convey intense emotional-affective states, a practice once anathema to ethnography's insistence on the clinical objectivity of the ethnographer at a remove from his subject matter.[10] The very titles of these poems play with ethnographic conventions. By referring to herself in the third person, the poet cum ethnographer invokes the clinical remove of the social scientist. Yet, she simultaneously undermines her objective authority by acknowledging "shame," "grief," and "desire." In *The Vulnerable Observer*, Behar famously referred to the admission (and subsequent theorizing of) emotions in ethnography as "an effort to map an intermediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life" (Behar 174-175). In de-centering the authoritative, clinical and external "eye/I" of the ethnographer and acknowledging subjectivity and emotional complicity, Faizullah's poems map Behar's borderland space. Indeed, it is Faizullah's very in-betweenness, her awkward positioning in relation to her material, that creates the mutually constitutive relationship between content and form.

6 The language of allowance in the poems' titles suggests that the subjective-affective are not a threat to her work but are actually constitutive of it. The emotions she acknowledges are the basis for the empathy that connects Faizullah and the women she interviews in ways beyond a sense of shared cultural, ethnic, or religious identity. At the same time, critical self-reflection – Faizullah's ability to view herself as part of a larger system of embedded power relations, signaled to us in part through her manipulation of the ethnographic gaze – grounds Faizullah's work in the important differences between her and the birangona. For example, in "The Interviewer Acknowledges Grief," Faizullah remembers her dead sister—"the voices of these / hurt women flowering" remind her that her sister "won't grow breasts, never / feel desire rippling across you:" [...] "Because you / can't reassure me I have / the right to

ask anything / of these women whose bodies won't / ever again be their own" (Faizullah 47). Personal affiliation through a shared sense of loss seems to close the distances between the women, but Faizullah's self-doubt around whether she has "the right to ask anything of these women" signals her awareness of her ambivalent position in relation to the specific social-historical contexts the birangona live. Here is the productive ambivalence that not only sets Faizullah apart from a conventional social scientist (after all, Malinowski would never question his right to ask questions) but also demands the nuances of poetry.

7 The poems inscribe the ideological dance between solidarity, complicity, and appropriation – the "I understand you; I am like you" and "I am not like you; I have more power" – through voice and multiple points of view. The third-person voice of the titles – the ironic voice of the ethnographer – is set against first, second, and an occasional return to third person, in the bodies of the poems. The shift between voices recalls Clifford and Marcus's "ethno-poetics" – a form of ethnography and "cultural poetics that is an interplay of voices, of positioned utterances" (Marcus & Clifford 11). Ethno-poetics challenges traditional ethnographic writing's focus on cultural practices that are observable, with the assumption that the speaking voice "speaks with automatic authority for others defined as unable to speak for themselves [...]" (10). In ethno-poetics, the ethnographer functions as another character within the narrative, which allows ethnography's subjects to become agents, even "co-authors" in their own stories, speaking subjects who see as well are seen (17, 14). In "The Interviewer Acknowledges Desire," Faizullah writes in the third person of bodily shame and grief. As she "sits down naked," smelling "her own body's resinous / musk," and watches "all the pixelated footage of the women's / kerosene lives," third person gives way to first person as her own grief, shame and desire become irrevocably enmeshed with that of the birangona: "[...] It's when / she begins to write about it in third person, / as though it was that simple / to unnail myself from my own body" (Faizullah 43). The slippage here from third person to first turn the ethnographic "I/eye" inward in a self-conscious negotiation of the ethnographic gaze, troubling the power relations behind the binaries her work invokes: subjective /objective, distant /intimate, personal/impersonal, here/there, speaker/spoken for. In the complex ways in which Faizullah connects and distinguishes position and point of view, she approaches the foregrounding of historical, cultural, and textual specificities that Carr argues is fundamental to any transnational feminist discussion of testimonials (Carr, qtd. in Grewal & Kaplan 162).

8 The linked poems titled "Interview with a Birangona" and subtitled with one of the eight questions Faizullah asked the *birangona* during her interviews (see Appendix) layer voice and point of view. Against the striking titles, with their third-person language of ethnographic documentation, the answering

voices of the *birangona* in the bodies of the poems are written in the first person, in elegant couplets, left-justified with soft and balanced line breaks, punctuated at times by white space. In these poems, multivocality allows an approximation between self and other that is neither appropriative nor domineering. Faizullah avoids speaking for the *birangona* – she speaks alongside and into their testimonies. In the gentle fluctuations between "I" and "we/us," the tension between victimhood and agency plays out, not in the memories of individual trauma but in relationships with other *birangona*. In their testimony, women's relationships are as much a source of ambivalence as they are solidarity: "I held / her as she shook at night: pond water / scored by storm. She held me / as I shook at dawn. Don't you know / they made us watch her head fall / from the rusted blade of the old / jute machine?" (30-31); "On a thin lavender evening / like this one, we sisters sat /mand waited until we were only / listening for them to come" (44); "There were days we wooed him, betrayed each other / for his attention – now he turns me over on burlap. / Outside, bundles of jute skim the wide river. I turn / my face away" (24); "We held each other's hands / but did not promise not to let go" (45). In places, the verbs are active acts of solidarity and/or survival: "I held her;" "She held me;" "we wooed him, betrayed each other;" "I turn my face away." At other times, the women are more passive: "they made us watch her;" "we sisters sat and waited;" "now he turns me over." In foregrounding women's relationships with each other, including her relationship to the *birangona*, through point of view, Faizullah's poetry avoids forms of cultural appropriation which transnational feminist theorists such as Carr have (justifiably) expressed caution against.[11]

9 In the first person, personal and collective, the *birangona* are not lionized as war heroines; they are not tragic, passive victims, and they are not always noble. Sometimes, they are not even (fully) there. One woman can only remember her mother as a fragment: "The dark rope / of Mother's shaking arm was what / I last saw before I walked away" (50). Metonymic substitution and synecdochal fragmentation obscure and reduce the mother who is unable, or unwilling, to protect her daughter. It is deeply paradoxical that a poetics of witness can testify to a person's humanity through a rejection of wholeness or completeness. Yet, that is exactly what Faizullah's poetry does. Without fetishizing the incomplete or broken, her poems grant women the space to occupy vulnerable bodies (and relationships) but also bodies (and relationships) with agency.

10 Negative spaces – hollows, gaps, fragments, ambivalence, silence – are ethnographic and poetic tools Faizullah uses to unsettle the speaker/spoken for dynamics. The poem [*tell her what happened to you…*] describes Faizullah's first day interviewing the *birangona* at a support group for rape survivors. The poem ends with a beginning: "*My mother and I were rolling out rice flour rotis*

at dawn as usual for breakfast, the first of the women begins." Here, the switch between first and third person in the same sentence enacts a shutting down or closure of the *birangona*'s voice. Yet, given the context and the series of poems the reader knows will follow, the poet's intervention in the sentence's final clause reads more as protection and discretion, a poetic act of gently closing the door. There is a dignity in leaving this story untold and unfinished. It is enough sometimes, she suggests, to know that you don't need to know. In places, gaps or silences create the effect of entering into a conversation that has already started. "Interview with a Birangona / 6. *Many of the birangona had children by Pakistani soldiers. Did you have a child as well?*" begins with an anaphoric "Besides" repeated in three of the poem's eight lines. The repetition of a transition word creates the effect of belatedness in the reader; that she has come late to the conversation and hasn't heard the whole story. Maybe there is a "whole story" to be heard and maybe there isn't – the point is that Faizullah doesn't force resolution. When the speaker describes giving birth to an unwanted child that her broken body was unable to feed and unable to love, she leaves out everything that came before the birth (namely, the act of rape). Her silence, or Faizullah's restraint, suggests alternatives beyond shame, modesty or politeness.

11 But there's more than either aggression or politeness at work in Faizullah's choices. By working against narrativizing and cohesion, she pushes back against the interviewer's traditional *need to know* and the author's *need to share*. As ethnographic strategy, refusals in the form of silences can serve important political and social functions. In Audra Simpson's theory of ethnographic refusal, refusal is more than resistance to – it is generative of silence (Simpson 78).[12] Silence is not so much negative, empty space as it is actively creating new political and social spaces; it can open up productive resistance to oppression and build community.[13] In her essay, "The Female Body and 'Transnational' Reproduction; or, Rape by Any Other Name?", Mary Layoun argues women's self-narratives of rape in which gaps, disruptions, contradictions and ambivalences appear can suggest "limited, compromised, partial" reclamations to agency (Layoun 72). Without elevating silence to the level of an empowerment that her subjects may not feel or have access to, Faizullah's poems gently and carefully leave open the possibility of agency through telling – and not telling – her what happened. In doing this, her poetry makes an alternative space for ambivalent relationships between women that are more than binaries, more than victim/"war hero," speaker/spoken for, American/Bengali.

12 The silence around the loss that rape imposes on women is embodied in the imagery Faizullah uses when the *birangona* refer to their bodies. In "Instructions for the Interviewer," the poem's form is drawn from emptiness:

"*Once*, she will say, *I didn't / know there was a hollow inside / me until he pushed himself / into it*" (23). The line sets an anaphoric pattern where each new sentence begins with "Once." That past and present "O" of circularity, repetition, opening, violation, emptiness and ambivalence, is the typographical correspondence to the negated "hollow" space of the *birangona*'s body. Another woman describes her breast that is unable to feed the infant she bore as a result of her rape as an "unwilling hollow of flesh" (39). Here, negation and absence are survival strategies the body uses on itself. In Faizullah's telling, this woman "did not want his / or his or his child inside me, / outside me, beside me," and her body's inability to produce milk is the rejection and defiance she was denied during her rape. By working against dominant narratives, typically the product of masculinized memory and masculinized narratives which rely on the impression of coherence, women's self-narratives [of rape] can offer multiple, fragmented, in-process, ambivalent contestations to power (Layoun 65; Enloe in McClintock 462).

13 Such silences, gaps and ambivalences are an intrinsic element of traumatic text, according to Jessica Lang in *Textual Silence: Unreadability and the Holocaust*. Textual silences are silences that are read as formal choices on the page (blankness, ellipses, dashes, interruptions, incomplete sentences) even while having unreadable qualities.[14] Rather than marking the absence of substance, "textual silence" is "irrepressible as a force bearing meaning" (Lang 3-4). Yet, as a borderlands text committed to transnational feminist praxis, Faizullah's textual silences bear meanings that are ambivalent. When the speaker confesses: "Once, you learned / that inside you was not hollow / but seam: color of the rim of the river" (23), she is not so much rejecting loss as conjuring ambivalence. In *Seam*, rivers, bodies, and poems, like seams, are border spaces, characterized by literal lines (of thread, of limb, of bank, of cartography and of poetry), as well as figurative spaces of metaphor. As metaphor, seams join past and present, here and there. Like a borderland, "seam" draws together previously disjointed parts but remains as a visible marker of previous fragmentation. As a connective seam, the image stitches together the book's motifs of body, water, and identity, but unevenly. The river is only partially conjured; it is the "rim of the river" that the seam resembles, a liminal space of (dis)location. One of the typographical equivalents for (dis) connection, the colon, formally replicates the uneasy space of connection/ disconnection. In its role as the signal of a pause between articulated phrases, the colon also has sonic qualities. The pause indicated by the colon represents the silence of what cannot be spoken. In opening testimonial to poetry, Faizullah offers a visual grammar expansive enough for connectivity and voice as well as impasse, disruption and stillness.

14 *Seam*'s palimpsestic layering of voices and silences moves *Seam* across time and space, weaving personal, familial and cultural testimony into a transnational and transtemporal poetics. The 5-part poem, "1971," which opens the collection, establishes the chronotopic importance of 1971 as the moment in time and location in space around which the poem, and the book, cycle. Faizullah's slippery point of view hovers around her mother: "Your / mother, age eight, follows / your grandmother down worn / stone steps to the old pond" (Faizullah 1). In the self-address of second person, Faizullah is both intimate and distant, rejecting the clinical remove of ethnography while also rejecting the myopic lyric "I." The second person is an allowance – it allows the speaker to speak of herself, yet not herself, her mother, yet not her mother. In the third and fourth stanzas, the second-person voice slips into her mother's consciousness, imagining and occupying her mother's thoughts: "— the same color, / your mother thinks, as / a dress she'd like to twirl / the world in." The poem advances and retreats from Mother and Grandmother, the ambivalent second person always a shield against total immersion or total remove.

15 The manipulation of voice is a time machine through which Faizullah travels to the Bangladesh of her mother's childhood in 1971 and the west Texas of the early twenty-first century, where Faizullah prepares to leave for Dhaka. The poem's first section takes place during a historical "present" of 1971, where the speaker imagines her mother at eight years old in Bangladesh. The first two stanzas yoke west Texas and Bangladesh through an act of comparative historical memory: "In west Texas, oil froths / luxurious from hard ground / while across Bangladesh / bayoneted women stain / pond water blossom" (1). Formally, the repetition of imagery in a catalogue in the first stanza of part ii invokes a similar Texas-from/in-Bangladesh perspective, echoing part i: "Gather these materials: / slivers of wet soap, hair / swirling pond water, black oil" (3). The "oil froths" of west Texas become the "black oil" on the surface of the pond in Bangladesh. The spatiotemporal enmeshing of Texas and Bangladesh occurs again in the poem's final section, as the speaker imagines her mother:

> Two oceans between you, but still
> you can see her running a finger
> along the granite counter in the sun-
> spilled kitchen waiting for the tea
> to boil before she drives past old
> west Texas oil fields [...] (10).

16 The speaker's memories of home layer the near past into a present moment in Dhaka (where she's gone to re-visit a more distant past) that is already in the past by the time we read the poem. The circular movements across time and space are represented formally in the poem's structure: the first and

the final sections share the same tight, left-justified composition, while the intermediary poems use a sweeping, disjointed lineation or couplets.

17 History is the thread unraveling in the third section of "1971:" "the entire world unraveling / like thread your mother pulls / and pulls away from the hem of her / dress. In America, the bodies / of men and women march forward / in protest, rage candling" (5). While "in Vietnam, monks / light themselves on fire," and back in Bangladesh: "soon, the men whose stomachs / flinch inward will struggle / the curved blades of their bayonets / into khaki-clad bodies." The present time of these lines is both "past" (to the poet, to us) but also very "present" in its reference to violence and instability. There's a similarly layered spatial tension between the transnational "here" and "there" of Faizullah's mother and grandmother, here in Bangladesh, but in a future that is two pages past in the book, they are in Texas, having immigrated to the United States. The disruptions to linear time that poetic form performs allow Faizullah to both occupy and distance herself from history – more ambivalent positioning. In the poem's final section, the speaker steps out onto the veranda of her mother's home, and we understand that she is stepping into her project, requiring movement that is simultaneously a step forward in her own personal trajectory and a step backwards in time. "Gather these materials," she writes, repeating the opening line of part ii; by now we understand the "materials" are more than "slivers of soap, hair, swirling pond water, black oil" – they are testimonies. "*Tell me, you say, about 1971*," the speaker entreats her mother, cycling back to the poem's title, ending with a beginning and mirroring the looped and looping movements of the speaker herself.

18 An intertextual reading of "1971" into the "Interview" series illustrates how Faizullah uses echo and repetition, layered imagery and foreshadowing, to cycle backward and forward in time as well as across continents. Foreshadowing disrupts linearity through the use of images that bring the past into the present and present into the past. The "curved blades of the bayonets" above and the "bayoneted women" from the second stanza are ominous gestures to the war to come, its violence and its victims. Water, in particular, is a constant source of imagery that displaces past and future. Images that foreshadow swirl around memories, pooled and flowing, muddied and disrupted, personal, familial and cultural. Each section in "1971" returns to the "green pond" where the speaker remembers watching her mother bathe: "Mother watches Grandmother / disappear into water: light:" (3). The lyrical articulation of water and light through the use of colons renders the disappearance almost transcendent. The green water takes on a semi-mythical status, connecting female memory to a moment before violation – the "undrowned /ceremonies" of the third and fifth sections. Winding, fragmented lineation emphasizes white space, such as the space of indent before "ceremonies," where we linger in the Prelapsarian

space of female ritual. But "undrowned" also invokes the specter of drowned – those "bayoneted women" who "stain / pond water blossom" and conjure the horrors of the *birangona* testimony which comes later in the book: "Gleaming water sweeps over / Mother's feet. Bayonets. Teeth." or "pulled / down into the river again / and again" (25, 28).

19 The memory of Faizullah's grandmother's bathing ritual (told from the point of view of Faizullah's mother) is fragmented and juxtaposed against an equally fragmented story of "a Bangladeshi woman" who "catches the gaze of a Pakistani soldier." "*She bathed the same / way each time*, Mother says" describing the daily ritual of removing and folding the sari before she begins her routine. Against this memory, the other Bangladeshi woman's "sari is torn / from her—" as she becomes "the torn woman a helix of blood." Dashes punctuate these fragments of memory – eighteen dashes for forty-eight lines. In some places, the dash signals an interruption: "stone steps—*how I loved*, / she says, *to watch her*—" (7). As syntactical incisions that both join and separate, Faizullah's dashes keep each woman's voice singular while inviting slippage between family history and cultural history.

20 In juxtaposing water's function as a site for ritual ablution with a site of trauma, "1971" foreshadows the important, ambivalent place the river occupies throughout the "Interview" poems. In the *birangonas*' testimony, the river is where female memory meets female bodies. The river water, green in the pre-war moment of "1971," becomes "muddy" in memory (34). Before the war – the poems' most distant past – rivers and wells are female spaces, sites of gendered labor but also social sites for gathering. In their pre-war lives, women "pulled water together / from the muddy river we / used to sit beside before" (30). The river is a site of violent repetition where women are "pulled / down into the river again / and again. Each day, each / night: river, rock, fist—" (28). But the river also offers moments of oblivion. To be taken away for rape also means: "Another chance to hear the river's gray lull" (34). In one poem, the river is a space of survival: "*They tossed me into that / river but the river wouldn't kill me*" (46).

21 In ***Autoethnography*** as Feminist Method, Elizabeth Ettorre proposes four ways in which autoethnography contributes to feminist praxis:

> (1) autoethnography creates transitional, intermediate spaces, inhabiting the crossroads or borderlands of embodied emotions; (2) autoethnography is an active demonstration of 'the personal is political'; (3) autoethnography is feminist critical writing which is performative, that is committed to the future of women and (4) autoethnography helps raise oppositional consciousness by exposing precarity (Ettorre 4).

22 Building on Ettorre, this essay claims that Tarfia Faizullah's *Seam* introduces a feminist poetics of mediated testimonial disclosure through which transnational feminist praxis becomes a poetic practice. I argue that poetry's emphasis on form – language's visual qualities – and transnational feminist theory's commitment to excavating the similarities and differences between women across space and time distinguish Faizullah's poetics of testimony from other forms of feminist life writing. As an ambivalently positioned indigenous ethnographer poet, Faizullah embodies transitional, interstitial spaces of Ettorre's feminist autoethnography while extending the borderlands from political identity and affective state to the page as a series of poetic techniques. In *Seam*, it is *poetic form* that visualizes the positioned individual as part of a community, enabling lateral instead of hierarchical affiliations that have the solidarity-building, affirming potential called for by feminist scholars. Through the formal opportunities poetry opens, Faizullah's language can sound her identification and solidarity with the *birangona* while also marking the differences between them. The personal as political as always already poetic. Multiple points of view call attention to where "you"/ "I"/ "she" overlap, yet the textual gaps, elisions and silences demarcate the uneven seams between who speaks, who is spoken for, and who is silent. Her poetry creates "the ground for historically specific differences and similarities between women in diverse and asymmetrical relations, creating alternative histories, identities, and possibilities for alliances" (Kaplan 139). In these moments of delicate negotiation, Faizullah turns a poetics of testimony into a feminist practice of affiliation that contests the hierarchies embedded in traditional forms of life writing. Textual ambivalence is a (per)form(ance) of precarity and also strategic refusal, challenging linear histories and narratives of domination and control, honoring that which is left out as a form of loss – a possible source of the reclamation of agency.

Appendix

1. What were you doing when they came for you? 2.Where did the Pakistani military take you, and were there others there? 3. Would you consider yourself a survivor or a victim? 4. Were there other women there? Did you get along with them? 5. Who was in charge at this camp? What were your days like? 6. Many of the birangona had children by Pakistani soldiers. Did you have a child as well? 7. Do you have siblings? Where were they? 8. After the war was over, what did you do? Did you go back home?

Notes

[1] The repression largely took the form of a program of Islamisation by West Pakistan, which objected to the more syncretic Islamic practice of Bengali Muslims. As Naila Kabeer points out: "The Islam of Bengal was not the Islam of Pakistan; it bore the imprint of very different historical and social forces" (Kabeer 117). The questions of identity for Bengali Muslims raised by West Pakistan's attempts to homogenize religion (what matters more—ethnicity or religion?) eventually turned what began as a middle-class revolt into a mass movement.

[2] Perhaps the most tragic victims of Pakistani hatred and suspicion were the estimated 300,000 Bengali women who were raped by Pakistani soldiers, purportedly in their mission to "improve the genes of the Bengali people and thus populate Bangladesh with 'pure' Muslims. The policy of assimilation-through-miscegenation revealed the terrible deluded logic of racial supremacy" (Kabeer 122).

[3] "The term was an attempt to disguise the sexual violence of the crime so as to make social ostracism of its victims less severe. However, it merely highlighted the social hypocrisy and unease surrounding the issue of female virtue in Bangladesh and many of the women were rejected by their families" (Kabeer 125).

[4] Following Stanley, I understand praxis as a political commitment to changing the world, a rejection of the research/theory divide, and centering methodological questions of 'how' (Stanley 15). To this I also add the decolonizing potential of feminist praxis, as theorized by scholars such as Lugones and Pérez.

[5] Transnational feminism is a political project of solidarity that includes scholarship, activism, artistic expression, as well as lived practices of daily life. Transnational feminism's diverse vectors share, following Chandra Mohanty, a commitment to interrogating the "multiple, fluid structures of domination which intersect to locate women differently at particular historical conjectures, while at the same time insisting on the dynamic oppositional agency of individuals and collectives and their engagement in 'daily life'" (Mohanty 13).

[6] See Warren, "Narrating Cultural Resurgence: Genre and Self-Representation for Pan Mayan Writers" in Reed-Danahay.

[7] My own influences here include bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Sara Ahmad, Ruth Behar, and Elizabeth Ettorre, although there are many, many more. Anzaldúa's *auto-historia teoría* (self-history theory), which argues for the epistemological value of the *mestiza*'s personal-cultural experience expressed through hybrid forms, or Ettorre's notion of autoethnography as feminist method, through which the process of writing the self transforms "personal stories into political realities by revealing power

Notes

inequalities inherent in human relationships and the complex cultures of emotions embedded in these unequal relationships" (Ettorre 2) are just two examples of feminist interventions in the content and form of self-writing.

[8] "To be like the sphinx is the basic condition of the nonnormative person at any border zone," argues poet-scholar Heather Yeung in "The Sphinx Experiment."

[9] Faizullah's work is in conversation with Gloria Anzaldúa's theorizing of therelationship between the social-historic identity of ***la mestiza***, the "mestiza consciousness" which this identity gives rise to and the corresponding "constant changing of forms" and deep structure of her writing (Anzaldúa 113).

[10] Ethnographer James Clifford assets, "the predominant metaphors in anthropological research have been participant-observation, data collection, and cultural description, all of which presuppose a standpoint outside – looking at, objectifying [...] a given reality" (Clifford 11).

[11] Scholars such as Carr protest the export of women's testimonial narratives from the Global South to the First World as consumable products, following the routes of the same transnational capitalist flows often implicated in whatever (typically abject) circumstances the testifying subject(s) are bearing witness to.

[12] Carole McGranahan offers a cogent summary of Simpson's signature contribution: "In her recent book Mohawk Interruptus, Audra Simpson (2014, 107) considers how refusal and disengagement structure possibilities, as well as produce subjects, histories, and politics. She wwrites of refusal as shedding light on something we've missed: 'There was something that seemed to reveal itself at the point of refusal – a stance, a principle, a historical narrative, and an enjoyment in the reveal.' Refusal appears in her scholarship as both subject and method. It is the story of Kahnawà:ke Mohawk refusals of Canadian and U.S. state sovereignty, along with their histories of being refused by both governments. It is also a political and methodological stance presented as an accounting, a cartography, an analytical strategy, and a writing style" (McGranahan 321).

[13] See Simpson, McGranahan and Sobo (in McGranahan).

[14] "The unreadable both binds the text to the world of the reader – we hold it in our hands, we turn the pages – and moves it away from all things which that world is made of – from the normal limitations inscribed by reading" (Lang 4).

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Biography

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Soft Politics: Latinx Solidarity (Baby) in Maya Chinchilla's *The Cha Cha Files: A Chapina Poética* (2014)

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Abstract This article examines a series of poems by the Guatemalan-American writer Maya Chinchilla, focusing specifically on her use of a "soft aesthetic" to achieve solidarity (in-your-face pink imagery, visions of unicorns, Hello Kitty stuffed animals, intimate sharing of emotion, aspirations of transcendental love sprinkled with multi-colored glitter). This particular cultural politics of "radical softness" speaks from a position of open vulnerability to reveal intimate experiences, yearnings, and desires. The testimonial spirit of "radical softness" points toward the creation of a politically charged affective community in which a collective and queer "we" seeks to uncover uneven relations of power and open a critical space from which "we" may share freely the aftershocks of the oppressive structures that affect "our" lives. It is from this soft locus that hidden histories of queer survival are documented and shared to inspire urgent political action beyond the translatable confines of traditional "queer" academia.

Keywords Central America, Latina/Chicana Feminism, Memory, Poetry, Queer Politics, Testimony.

Cited Names Maya Chinchilla, Lora Mathis, Andi Schwartz, Care Bears, Hello Kitty, Sugs the Axolotl, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Sonia Saldívar-Hull, Chela Sandoval, Ana Patricia Rodríguez, Barack Obama, Francisco Goldman, Judith Sierra-Rivera, AnaLouise Keating

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1 This article performs a cultural and critical analysis of soft political aesthetics in Maya Chinchilla's ***The Cha Cha Files: A Chapina Poética***. Throughout her collection of poetry, Chinchilla embraces the vulnerability of the textual space in order to bring bodies together and to foster solidarity. The text in question represents what the author has deemed a collection of "faggotry, poetry, and triumph;" she claims it is "part memory, part queer imaginary, and honors Central American ***feministas***, Long Beach roqueras, families divided by war, lovers separated by borders, and celebrates the pleasure and heartbreak of femmes, machas, y mariconadas" (2). Chinchilla herself is a founding member of the performance group "Las Manas" and has curated artistic events investigating the intersection of art, media, and politics for more than 15 years. Her most recent video project "SOLIDARITY BABY" tells the story of a child of the Central American solidarity movement. In this video, she uses her poetry and images from memories to "build bridges between her family history and present-day immigrant rights struggles" (3). In this article, I look specifically at the structure of soft vulnerability in Chinchilla's poetic production in order to ask what, perhaps, might the world look like from the locus of softness? What kind of social collective does this soft space seek to construct, particularly through the testimonial voice of a Guatemalan-American migrant?

2 The commitment to softness by ***cuir*** ("queer," here preference is given to the Spanish spelling to differentiate between queer ideologies as developed in the U.S. academy and those that have been organically produced from below) and migrant writers demands a new type of critical engagement: an exploration of an open vulnerability aimed at reaching out to a community of people who may share the same experiences and feelings as the speaker. This type of approach represents a bodily process that is enmeshed in a three-dimensional world, where historical processes still affect and cannot be seen, yet can still be accessed. That is, by inviting the reader to share in untold histories shrouded in pain, these histories are made visible and accessible to others, proclaiming boldly "We are not alone, and we will not forget." In accessing these powerful memories and acknowledging that these structures still affect their lives in the present, the community bound by a soft, vulnerable intimacy may be moved toward a future collective action. Therefore, by fully inhabiting this soft space with the speaker and accepting the call to be seen and ***felt***, we may begin to realize that historical reality actively works upon the present and makes it perceivable as bodily/emotional sensations. Thus, the call to embrace "radical softness" is not simply a call to excavate hidden histories of violence that work upon the body, but rather an invitation to ***inhabit*** openly a shared – sometimes sensual – reality in order to ***feel*** it more fully – a call to "softly" engage with each other and build a community where bodies are open, stories are told without fear, and coalitions are created through loving, even magical, embrace.

3 My reading will lay out a line of propositions that defend the use of a soft structure of feeling as critical and visionary, one in which shifting borders and horizons are brought to the fore and located as a central hub of political and cultural power. First, I will explore how the soft position supports the creation of an alternative and ephemeral archive of knowledge and builds upon a similar space of creation: Nepantla. This will further demonstrate my understanding of radical softness as a position that attempts to illuminate and disarticulate the systems of power that separate bodies to rebuild a new existence by placing emphasis on boundary crossing and mobility toward alternative and hospitable spaces. Second, I will engage in a close reading of *The Cha Cha Files*. In this analysis, I will focus on the ways in which the poetic subject seeks to imagine worlds for Central Americans born and raised in the diaspora. I propose that it is through the affective charges of yearning and desire brought on by the soft call for community that the world and its inhabitants are reorganized to open new spaces for U.S. Central Americans. In this way, the soft subject facilitates the construction of the imaginary site of poetic creation and political action.

A Short Genealogy of Softness

4 The term "radical softness" has recently been taken up by *cuir*/queer and feminist artists and activists. Most notably cited in many online communities that take up the mantle of soft aesthetics is Lora Mathis's artist work "Radical Softness as A Weapon." Following this link, the viewer will see these same words appear on their page nestled on a pink, fabric surface and surrounded by a coiled pearl necklace – not unlike a delicate viper protecting its nest. Framing the image are two butcher knives and an open Sheffield pocketknife with serrated blades. One's gaze is at once intimately invited into what at first appears to be an inviting space where one might perhaps want to open themselves to others and share thoughts in a comfortable and glittery environment, however, there is the constant reminder of violence that presides over the table – a looming presence that all who enter this space must acknowledge. Andi Schwartz, a self-proclaimed "acafemmic" who received her PhD from York University, writes about this particular image and the "cultural politics of softness" in a *Guts Magazine* article published in December of 2018. In this article, Schwartz postulates that softness is "about honoring pain," and creating communities that reinforce "protective boundaries" (3). Therefore, both Mathis and Schwartz will concede that "soft spaces" are those that invite others to reside in comfort, but at the same time to "mind the knives" that serve as both protection and relics of the past that must be acknowledged. In invoking "softness" in these cases, we conjure an aesthetic that foregrounds vulnerability and emotionality, one that does the work of creating safe

boundaries in order to come to terms with ongoing histories of dispossession. Schwartz argues that this works in opposition to hardness: "The preference for hardness that prevails in many circles betrays a hefty stake in the (neo) liberal myth of the autonomous, independent subject. But many argue that acknowledging our vulnerability foregrounds our actual interdependent human nature, rather than pretending we could live without each other" (*Politics of Softness* 2). Thus, softness invites one into the group; it ultimately means that "we," as communities that have been historically dispossessed, honor the pain in each other, and in this vulnerable space we create a protective boundary or border that emerges in the appeal that we make to each other's humanity. Softness means that we collectively share our burdens, and together, "we" recognize that we ***deserve and can demand*** better.

5 It is also important to note that a similar type of soft aesthetic is seen throughout migrant and immigrant communities in the U.S. Southwest, mostly through digital networks and social media pages such as Instagram. For example, the account @sugarbombingworld, based in Mexico City, caters to the radical anarchist community of migrants in the U.S. through images of Care Bears setting fire to police cars, Hello Kitty holding signs that read "Fuck ICE," and the newest member of their community, Sugs the Axolotl. Sugs is often depicted holding a Molotov cocktail framed in a banner that reads "Bad Ass Babes Club." The page underscores the healing abilities of the axolotl as well as the "cute," juvenile appearance they retain throughout their lives. In defining their community as one of vulnerable peoples that must seek to heal themselves through force, they carve out a space for new politics to emerge. The healing potential of the "cute" mascot drives their political message as one that reaches out to those who have been hurt by the system and invites us in to perhaps fight back to heal our wounds while simultaneously remaining open and vulnerable to other "Bad Ass Babes" that can sympathize with being forced to the limits of national belonging. Here the message is: we are a community that has come together to work through our pain, but in this collectivity we recognize the shared burden of neoliberal policy and are ready to reclaim what is ours. We reject your system of policing and immigration control that is historically embedded in racist notions of personhood and citizenship, and in our shared, vulnerable state, we will come together and speak/fight back.

6 These soft political aesthetics expand upon another point of multiple contact and possibilities that informs Chinchilla's own activism: Gloria Anzaldúa's theories of Nepantla. An avid student of Anzaldúa, Chinchilla claims her as foremother in her poetry and seems to follow in the same spirit of creative community formation as she builds her own soft positionality. Nepantla is a Nahuatl word reclaimed by Anzaldúa to represent "spaces of change[,] liminal,

in-between spaces" (*Interviews* 168). These can be spaces of transition, confusion, and ambiguity, but also represent a place of agency in which ways of knowing and connection are forged to ultimately bring about social change. She defines those that occupy this space as ***nepantleras***:

> The supreme bordercrossers who act as intermediaries between cultures and their various versions of reality and like the ancient chamanas, move between worlds. They serve as agents of awakening, inspire and change others to deeper awareness, greater conocimiento, serve as reminders of each other's search for wholeness of being. ("Speaking Across the Divide" 78)

7 For Anzaldúa, these ***nepantleras*** are those who traverse "the cracks between the worlds and see through the holes in reality" in order to remake knowledge, meaning, and identity (***Light in the Dark*** 45, 6) In this way, she invites the reader to take action through the complexity of experience, race, class, sexual orientation, and gender – a way to locate the self and community within a social narrative that is not of the community's own creation (***Light in the Dark*** 6).

8 Chinchilla engages with the spirit of Nepantla to create a new shared space in hopes that her utopian visions may someday perhaps become reality. Like Anzaldúa, she utilizes various kinds of narratives that make up her life: feminism, race, ethnicity, queerness, gender, and artistic practices – all of which send her readers on a kind of "***ensueño***," a flight of imagination meant to help shift how we see our world: a dialogue between the old and the "not yet" that could revise how we act in the present. Chinchilla extends the mission of the *nepantlera* by imbuing this particular space with a "soft aesthetic" – in-your-face pink imagery, visions of unicorns, Hello Kitty stuffed animals, children's nursery rhymes, and aspirations of transcendental love sprinkled with multi-colored glitter. Radical softness surrounds Nepantla and transforms it into a space where "we" (her community of Central American migrants) do not have to hide emotional responses to social, political, or historical processes, but rather become able to strategically utilize vulnerability-in-community in order to raise political awareness about the social structures that enable and perpetuate violent and painful experiences of displacement.

9 A recurrence to a type of soft vulnerability, then, permits us to closely engage with the interrelations of social reality that the author has endured to produce the words on the page. In other words, it brings the reader-author-text into an intimate space that opens the world up so that we may perhaps perceive more wholly a new social, political, and historical world – a world that actively (re)constitutes through vulnerability in a move toward social reparations.

Soft Archives and Politics Otherwise

10 Throughout ***The Cha Cha Files***, Chinchilla asks important questions about her childhood, about the consequences of crossing borders and historical wars that date back for decades. She asks how it might be possible to document how these events have impacted her life, but at the same time de-link herself from solely being identified with intervention and death – a new being that can feel and create on her own terms, who can dare to feel her own joy. Her poetry also points to a history that lies beneath contemporary reports replayed by the news media, which often speak of intrusive "caravans" of migrants ready to "infiltrate" the United States, but somehow disregard how a history of intervention, economic dependency, colonization, and individual choices made within families led to these movements. For the "solidarity baby" (the child born amid solidarity movements and contra wars in the 80s and 90s), as Chinchilla identifies herself throughout the collection, it is important to open herself to the emotion of displacement, to the marks that these histories have left upon her body, and to do this in the soft embrace of a community that she hopes to forge. This community represents a solidarity that emerges from a space of radical softness, where we do not have to be afraid to lower our defenses and share the scars that emerge in an archive covered in magical, glitter-filled ink.

11 Historically, Chicana/Latina feminists have produced a unique mixture of solidarity fictions to build alliances and forge networks across geopolitical borders, connect local and global struggles, and confront neocolonial and imperialist forces that work across the Américas. The 1980s represents the beginning of this hemispheric contact zone among and between Latina feminists. The politically engaged work of Latina feminists such as Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Sonia Saldívar-Hull, and Chela Sandoval set the course for the production Central America-identified literature by Chicanas in the 1980s and 1990s. At the height of the U.S.-funded civil wars in Central America, a first-wave, U.S. Latinx Central American-allied literature comprised of various documentaries, mock-documentaries, and narratives/films sought to forge a connection and promote the liberation of these countries. Many of the producers and authors of the first wave could be traced back to the Central American peace and solidarity movements. These solidarity films and narratives expressed growing concern among Latinxs about the civil wars in Central America and elsewhere (such as Angola and Peru). These texts, in turn, produced a heightened awareness of U.S. intervention in Central America. Mostly, they engaged the image of the border, the wound, and wielded anger and pain to conceptualize the physical and psychic "borderlands" that mark their lives. They also proliferated a portrayal of Central America as feminized in relation to the masculine United States – discursively perpetuating a soft, malleable mass against a "hard," impenetrable object.

12 However, an ongoing production of contemporary Latinx literature in the United States has continued to meditate on the silence and invisibility of U.S. Central Americanness as well as on a history of trauma. More specifically, female activists and artists have begun to construct an image of Central American women's millennial resistance, resilience, and strength. These are women who came of age during the 1980s and 1990s, such as Maya Chinchilla, and now meditate on what the cultural baggage of neocolonialism, imperialism, dictatorship, war, and migration means for the children of the solidarity workers, authors, directors, and filmmakers mentioned above. Not only are writers such as Chinchilla (re)writing feminist narratives infused with Central American experiences, emotions, and perspectives, but they are also elaborating a more diverse and critical perspective on feminist Latinidades and body politics in the twenty-first century.

13 In this way, in Chinchilla's collection of poetry Central American names, places, persons, history, identity are always uncertain things, memories and objects that must be processed emotionally. Therefore, the questions of what is a particularly Central American and U.S. Central American reality and who are the Central Americans that inhabit this reality are brought to the fore through a documentation of emotions and a geography of soft objects that appear once and again throughout the collection (Hello Kitty notepads, glitter pens, unicorns, and the utopia of unconditional love). This archive of softness embraces a structure of feeling that seeks to call out to those who are just as vulnerable as the author, who wish to be seen, but feel that they too are invisible, and thus creatures of fantasy like the unicorn that walks through her pages. Ana Patricia Rodríguez writes in the foreword to Chinchilla's collection, "In Maya's poems, what ***matters is not getting it right***, but knowing one's place in the 'long line of resilience' – the Central American resilience, if not resistance" (xii). What seems to matter in this text, as Rodríguez suggests, is not the exactitude with which bodies and spaces are named, but the feelings of collectiveness that certain shared experiences incite. In her account of Central American reality, dictators, revolutionaries, and solidarity workers made plans, took actions, and told truths about the government, while the "solidarity baby" was left asking "am I a CENTRAL American?" The solidarity baby comes to the realization that while the diaspora may not share the same experiences as Central Americans in the isthmus, diasporic Central Americans have created their own space of belonging through the shared emotional experience that rethinking boundaries entails. The "baby" provides the soft space of identification, as Schwartz argues, that space of absolute vulnerability that seeks to endear the subject into listening to what must be told – in our case, a history of imperialism that has left scars, a people who are looking to heal, and a generation asking about what the future holds.

14 This stands in stark contrast to the ways in which the media, even "sympathetically," has depicted child migrants. Images of these children that flourished in 2014 at the time of the publication of ***The Cha Cha Files***, when then-president Barack Obama was publicly debating comprehensive immigration reform, were accompanied by words associated with natural disasters like surge, tide, influx. By media and State Department alike, these children were named as a faceless and unknown mass and marked by a largely unrecognized history within the United States. In her analysis of Francisco Goldman's work on Central America in ***Harper's Magazine***, ***The New York Times***, and ***The New Yorker***, Judith Sierra-Rivera comments on the treatment of migrants both by the media and by various agencies on both sides of the political divide – hinting that the violence of the border lies within the very foundation of the U.S. political system, rather than a singular party:

> In the case of unaccompanied minors, they were even further 'othered': called Other Than Mexicans (OTMs) by U.S. federal agencies because they were not from Mexico and, therefore, possessed unidentifiable migrant identities. This invisibility corresponds with a lack of knowledge in the United States about the geography that lies south of the Rio Grande and, specifically, about the isthmus that joins the Hemispheric Americas, forming one continuous continent. (***Affective Intellectuals*** 64)

15 As Sierra-Rivera demonstrates, in the Obama Administration's Spanish language outreach programs, words like ***save***, ***aggressive***, and ***protect*** accompanied the policing of the border (65), and the empty unknown that the U.S. imagines to be the geography south of Mexico became something to aggressively question. It is precisely within this messy political milieu that Chinchilla wields her poetry to break through this discourse of empire in order to destabilize the language of invisibility and bring a (hi)story to displaced peoples who are largely misunderstood by the U.S. public. It is precisely softness, a radical vulnerability, that she uses to de-center fear and suspicion, to reach out to a community that, like her, feels they are mythological, and to build visibility from the space of their own bodies and shared "hopes." While this project, at times, may seem utopian, it is precisely the radical political imagination – this particular soft structure of feeling – within the utopian dreams that mark Chinchilla's words as especially powerful in the message that they have to convey. In Chinchilla's writing, this group of Central American "unicorns" takes on a variety of names, faces, languages, and bodies, as well as the emotions that may be able to break through a dual invisibility-hypervisibility proliferated by an "us" in an empire that engenders a fear, hatred, and suspicion of "them."

16 In the first poem of the collection, "Solidarity Baby," the subject witnessing a constantly changing reality documents those aspects that have been rendered invisible to the larger public sphere:

> No one knows my secret plans
> documentary days, radio nights, printed palabras
> what I am capable of
> practicing storyteller strategies and messenger maneras
> holding the door open for the little ones who are coming thru
> what I am planning to do
> it's part of my dynamically (un)disciplined destiny
> to observe what is not obvious
> risking reporting truths untold
> layering laughter between tears
> campaigning and complaining for the silent
> who carry this country on their backs! (3-4)

17 The solidarity baby wages battles, makes secret plans, observes "what is not obvious," and reports hidden truths. Through this process of documentation and the gathering of otherwise unknown information, emotions, and desires, the poem is transformed into a soft archive of the Central American diasporic experience. Those "little ones" that follow the poetic voice through the door carve a space in the unspoken realm of tearful histories, for the small and vulnerable also have ordinary stories to tell, and, in their ordinariness, they may perhaps see each other and come together in solidarity. Chinchilla's soft space creates the possibility of coming together through "truths untold," where an imagined collectivity of "unknown" Central American-Americans read themselves on her pages. The soft archive and the emotional space of her poetry thus reach out to invite the reader "in," that is, to experience her emotions and partake in her hopes and dreams for the future. It is through this shared empathy conjured in the space of radical softness, and the community that it forges, that we might start to understand Central American-Americanness in the United States. Chinchilla asks the reader to share her *inquitudes* and therefore piece together a more complete image of her being through images, words, impressions, and shared yearnings.

18 In citing "storyteller strategies," "messenger maneras," and "undisciplined destines," Chinchilla boldly demands that the answers she is seeking cannot be found within official theoretical/philosophical traditions. She deals in "what is not obvious," and her mission is to invent and make knowledge and ways of knowing for the dispossessed. Her project is the struggle of recognizing and legitimizing excluded groups through creative and imaginative acts. In this first poem, she lays down her alternative approach to the text – through a reclaiming of infancy, of the small things, she insists that she must tell new stories so that the trance of ordinary existence might be broken and her magical community of the historically dispossessed might usher in a new order of things.

19 She points back to this soft space of (be)longing for the diaspora as she re-members days spent with her father working in solidarity networks. The official language of adults and the ways they have organized the world is disrupted in a comforting space that feels like home:

> I used to curl up on my father's lap while he
> Debated what lay between the lines,
> Chapín Spanish booming from his chest, comforting.
> …
> Let me see if I can get this right:
> A-B-CIA-GIC-FMSLN-URNG-UFW-XYZ
> I'm just looking for my place
> Am I a CENTRAL American?

20 Here, we are returned to the idea of a yearning that seeks to mend a fragmented reality, not acknowledged by those around her. The poetic voice speaks of "explosions in [her] heart" and a desire to "rest from running" in a new space that places the voice at the center of a new reality – making her a "CENTRAL" American. The poetic voice, immediately after asking where the center of America is located, proceeds to declare "[s]í pues, soy el epicentro" (5).[1] In this way, the poetic speaker places the intersections of past, present, and future as well as the geographically located Central American countries upon the speaking subject's body and nuances of her emotions as she conjures her identity. The creation of a new subjectivity is wrought once again with "militant explosions" that shake the fractured nature of her identity to its core. These explosions conjured by her glitter pen also work to make us question the alphabet and the political organizations that it hides. The very grammar of her existence means nothing to her when she herself feels that she does not belong.

21 The "magnitude" of the soft centrality to the creation of a *sense* of Central American identity is also captured in a poem titled "Mayita." As Chinchilla notes, "Maya" is a name that invokes a transnational and fluid history of multiple temporalities, places, languages, and races. Maya is "illusion in Hindi," "dream of duality," "maker…of magic," and "history of hombres y mujeres de maíz" (12).[2] This also recalls the Maya civilization and takes a postcolonial approach to pre-Columbus peoples and their cultures. Maya becomes the epicenter of her worldview, the genesis of her approach to reality. Not only does Chinchilla use this name to invoke her identity as one that is multiple, but she also uses the diminutive of Maya – Mayita – to "soften" her voice while imbuing herself into her poem through a soft magic. Her indigenous history and her child-like state become a powerful foundation upon which she constructs her world. "Mayita" transforms into a shaman of the future: "The illusion both blinds us in delusion and has the power to free us from it through consciousness…Maya is the maker. She means magic" (12). Here the "illusion" of the history invoked through her name is the trajectory of powerful women who have worked hard for a future yet to come. This link to the past through her name in the diminutive, then, establishes an arc between work done by her ancestors and her present project of truth-telling – a continuous trajectory of active hope,

of work being done to build a future worth inhabiting. As I have mentioned, this active working toward a future yet to come within the space of softness opens a spatio-temporal pause where Chinchilla reaches out to an imagined community of Central American-Americans (the "us" in her enunciation) and invites them to share in the ever-unfolding project of establishing a voice.

22 This poetic narrative – a soft archive of migrant experiences – is used to trace historical trends of forced displacements, while also drawing attention away from official historical records that the "solidarity baby" does not fully understand. She writes of her own racialized experience of migration as a vulnerable migrant subject, yet she is never overtaken by fear and dares to boldly testify. In this way, she speaks directly to the most vulnerable, those "babies" who dare to hope against all odds and to speak back to history which would equate their very existence to violence, intervention, and bloodshed. To break through this narrative, the image of the glitter-covered unicorn emerges from the ashes of the historical archive. This Central American Unicorn represents a bold voice that dares to move against the mainstream histories of Central American migrants, a badge that emerges from decades of crimes against humanity and civil wars to claim that the unicorn recognizes this pain, but that "we" are so much more than it. She writes in "What it's Like to be a Central American Unicorn for Those Who Aren't":

> First of all I am a mythical creature that is only mentioned
> if at all
> in relation to war, trauma, maras, revolutions,
> What if I tell you I don't speak any indigenous languages?
> (except for the remnants of words that have crept into the Spanish
> I re-learned in high school when I went to Guate that summer)
> That my family denies any indigenous ancestry
> (though DNA and memory say different)
> That we are an urban people who value engineering degrees
> above all else?
> And I can't go back over there in the same way anymore.
> I can't go back there
> over there doesn't exist anymore.

23 Here again, it is in the interstitial space opened by the image of the glittering unicorn, that the postcolonial or neocolonial subject speaks to, back, and against the unifying narratives of imperialism, neocolonialism, and globalization. The stories of the migrant break the silence and shine bright like the rainbow mane, impaling the dark unknown with the mystical horn to bring a new type of knowledge – it is in these zones of soft encounter that the valiant witness of reality locates a new epistemological mode of being. Here Chinchilla speaks her own self into existence, and, in doing so, pries open the existing worldviews about U.S. Central Americanness that are widely proliferated. By adding her own feelings, she invites those who have felt this way about their identities into her space – creating an opportunity to confront

previously comfortable frameworks and inhabit contradictory worldviews. The unicorn, in summoning such a chaotic space, challenges the reader to produce new meaning, and thus forces us to change.

24 Not only does the unicorn as a locus of radical softness appear in Chinchilla's collection of poetry, but she also produces pins that bear the stamp of the unicorns and that also read "Central American unicorns, we've been through some shit" (Figure 1):

25 In this material extension of her text, she allows her reader to don the mark of historical counter-intervention, that of a mythological and vulnerable creature that has vowed to tell history on its own terms. Furthermore, this act brings the "totality" into the textual space, creating the conditions in which those who identify with Chinchilla's call for the creation of a community of Central-American Americans may perhaps be able to better negotiate their position between themselves and the structures of history and social space that surround them through the physical markings of the pin. This open space

Figure 1.
Unicorn buttons sold by Maya Chinchilla during the Mujeres de Maíz International Women's Day event, 2015.

of radical softness will thus evoke an emotional community of "others" that truly understand the complexity of Central America, the ongoing problematic politics it shares with the United States, and the importance of a collective vision of active hope to change the future. Thus, her soft army of unicorns – those magical creatures – can manifest themselves into the world and tell their own stories of vulnerability to build upon the soft archives that Chinchilla has begun: "leave a trail of glitter that smells of copal, banana leaves, wood burning / stoves and moist green earth / so that other magical creatures may find me" (27). The ending of this poem is important for two reasons. First, it dialogues with the "magical" (traditional) elements of her culture, enticing those who identify specifically with the smells, flavors, and textures that she evokes to follow in her footsteps. Second, the last line underscores again the ordinary memories and bodily sensations that guide her political project. She reiterates the fact that power not only can be found in historical narratives

but in the ways that it makes itself known physically on her body. Power is also found in her everyday experiences. It is in the sharing of these everyday moments precisely where she locates her politics of solidarity.

26 Latina feminists have actively worked to forge spaces in which new knowledge can be located to change the way we view social reality through a politics of closeness. For example, Anzaldúa writes about the mythical-theoretical space of Nepantla in her *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro* (2015):

> I found that people were using 'Borderlands' in a more limited sense than I had meant it. So to elaborate on the psychic and emotional borderlands, I'm now using 'Nepantla' [...] With the nepantla paradigm, I try to theorize unarticulated dimensions of the experience of mestizas living in between overlapping and layered spaces of different cultures and social and geographic locations, of events and realities. (176)

27 Furthermore, she argues that those that inhabit this space, the ***nepantleras***, are threshold people; they move within and among multiple, often conflicting, worlds and refuse to align themselves exclusively with any single individual, group, or belief system. AnaLouise Keating writes, "[this] refusal is not easy; ***nepantleras*** must be willing to open themselves to personal risks and potential woundings which include, but are not limited to, self-division, isolation, misunderstanding, rejection, and accusations of disloyalty" (6). Therefore, nepantla includes both radical dis-identifications and transformations. We are able to dis-identify with existing beliefs and social structures, and by doing so we are able to transform these social conditions. However, the nepantlera is confined to the space of nepantla, according to Anzaldúa. It is important to note the painful dimensions of constant traveling between worlds and realities, for the nepantlera is never able to reside in the new world that she creates; boundaries are destroyed as soon as they are defined. The refusal to stay within the created and poetic worldview makes the nepantlera particularly vulnerable to isolation and rejection from collective belonging. While Chinchilla is most definitely influenced by these cuir witnesses to the uneven development of social reality (as she cites on multiple occasions in her talks with various women's groups and research centers), she builds upon this feminist archive to carve a similar space of openness and vulnerability, a place to dwell and share stories of pain that may perhaps be smoothed over by a collective love for one another. The soft space draws from the spiritual political orientation of Anzaldúa's Nepantla, but makes this a permanent space of dwelling-together.

28 Within the few poetic lines cited above, we notice an epistemic shift from traditional ways of knowing Central America, a disruption in the normative discourse surrounding what it means to embody a Central American subjectivity. The newly imagined Central America becomes embodied within the diaspora,

specifically within the "mythical" poetic speaker. This is achieved through Chinchilla's deterritorialization of Guatemala, claiming that "over there doesn't exist anymore." As we have seen in previous excerpts, Central American geography is uprooted and placed upon diasporic bodies within a U.S. context. The geographical region goes from being an external and historical trauma to an internal and present space of creation and reflection. This translation from past to present and from exteriority to interiority transforms the affective charge of Central American identity. Active hope replaces the trauma and nostalgia that has presided over the Central American imaginary in the mainstream U.S. imaginary to break through narratives of violence and pain, thus offering new stories that inform how "we" think U.S. Central Americanness.

29 The radical softness of a new space of shared stories comes through in "Jota Poetics,"[3] where Chinchilla writes:

> We are a bless-ed home
> warmed by unexpected guests
> we are voice
> soaring above the air
> healing all who come in contact
> We are letting go
> holding space for the 'mmm' not yet named

30 In these few lines, Chinchilla provides a re-mapping of conventional cartographic bodies that becomes "home" and "voice" that "heal" and "warm." According to Chinchilla, there is no stable concept of home, both the U.S. and Central America are cultural, physical, and geographic spaces that cannot provide a sense of community for those, like her, who have been displaced by an inherited history of displacement. However, this tension between both spaces is profoundly productive, as Carol Boyce Davis observes, "migration creates the desire for home which in turn produces the rewriting of home" (84). Once again, this yearning for identity produces a mobile subject that in turn produces creative and performative acts that attempt to construct a new reality and new concept of home. Chinchilla argues that Central America cannot and should not be defined exclusively as a type of nation/nationalism or geophysical space. Her poem reveals the need to think beyond false narratives of national unity and serves as a reminder of how these unifying gestures produce only more moments of exclusion. Here, the notion of a hospitable space is given priority and the new space is one of feeling and collective experience, one of radical softness.

31 The soft space of "Jota Poetics" is once again created by a "we" that wields hope as a way to displace feelings of fear and pain. Through this collective experience, the space finds its form, breaking through discourses that seek to silence:

> We are the threads that weave
> a bed for you to lay
> the wild roots that can't be cut back
> the skirt of a volcano con su boca ebullada
> the cactus flower blooming in the desert

32 Emotions as epicenter of an identity explosion bring together multiple competing strands to "weave" a "bed" in which the Central American-America subjectivity may lie and the space in which this subjectivity may make a "home" for itself. Chinchilla continues to drive her point home in her declaration that her stories make room for political imaginaries that have not yet fully coalesced, a future solidarity that promises a visible and hospitable presence of Central Americans in the U.S.: "We are letting go / Holding space for the "mmm" not yet named." (57) Here the soft space provides a safe haven while simultaneously moving toward and creating future spaces of connection and belonging, utopias and "elsewheres" that are yet on the horizon but whose warmth can be felt in the air, connecting a community on the way to a poetic home. They are the hopefulness embodied in the "magic glitter-filled pen to write in the names where the / documents left [them] out over and over" (94). Thus, while Chinchilla does not suggest a concrete and realistic solution to the dispersal of the Central American diaspora in the United States and the damaging effects of a single narrative of Central American subjectivity, she provides the necessary vision or map that ensures the return of memories and voices to protest an erasure from the national imaginary. In the final poem of the collection "Nuestras utopías," she shares "our" hopes for the future, where the "us" and "our" of the enunciation are those Central American subjects who are gathered together and speaking from the soft space, reaching out in vulnerability to ask "them" to consider "our" lives and personal histories in order to push back against an official archive of historical dispossession that rests in the collective response to humanitarian crises. Chinchilla writes:

> I wish we could engage at each other's levels until everyone felt heard
> but barely said a word and you wouldn't interrupt my stutter because
> you think you know better…
> I wish I could eat your tears with rainbow kisses and quench my thirst
> for eight daily glasses of balance, self-determination and growth…
> I wish intellect didn't make emotion feel less than…
> I wish we weren't in competition with crumbs and that we could
> form a new Voltron-being anytime we needed to call on each other's
> powers…
> I wish I could say, dance, sing all the insight, vision, flesh, document
> you need to hear, see, touch, be. (93-95)

33 Politically, ideologically, this yearning for interdependence and coalition drives against a "hard" masculinist "push" toward self-reliance to instead

reach out and embrace each other. This soft wish to kiss with rainbows, dialogue as equals, come together, feel without fear, and touch in every sense of the word is a collective refusal to be dehumanized by unjust power. The need to "document you" is a call to truly see the other and to move away from reproducing tired narratives of silent masses, but instead to speak hard-won truths, to actively hope, and to radically imagine how to live without fear now and in the future.

34 At the core of Chinchilla's radically soft call lies the recognition of interdependence and to refuse to continue internalizing ideas about humanity, life, and political solidarity that is disempowering. Softness is a call to imagine, act, and make otherwise, to willfully inhabit those structures of feeling that make "us" vulnerable and in "our" vulnerability and collective hope, build a future predicated on coexistence. Chinchilla's soft utopia, then, centers the partial crossing of a barely spoken future, a gap that her words cannot yet name. Located in the "mmm," her softness opens space for different kinds of thought produced by bodies that have been affected differently by historical and political structures that they inhabit. Thus, softness becomes a catalyst that may perhaps illuminate new or emerges modes of thought, or philosophies that bring the soft ones, the unicorns, together across various lines of difference. The borders of this soft utopia are constantly redrawn to make room for new struggles "the little ones running through," as Chinchilla outlines and to transcend the wound and speak in spite of it.

Notes

[1] Yes, I am the epicenter (All translations are mine unless otherwise noted).

[2] Men and women [made] of corn.

[3] "Jota" here is used as slang word for homosexual that has a variety of meanings depending upon national, social, and sexual context. It is normally used as a pejorative term to violently remove an individual from an official position within society.

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Biography

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Material Weapons: Paratext, Ethics, and Testimony in Carmen Aguirre's *Something Fierce*

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Abstract From its title onward, *Something Fierce* uses a host of material strategies that position the book as a *testimonio* – narrating Carmen Aguirre's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary Daughter* not only as a coming-of-age memoir, but rather as the communal story of the Chilean resistance, expressing an urgent justice claim, and invoking readers' responsibilities as witnesses. To develop my analysis of *Something Fierce*, I consult scholarship on paratext, the genre of *testimonio*, and research on the ethical and political stakes of testimonies as cultural commodities. I thus establish the key role of paratext as strategic "thresholds of interpretation" (Genette) that allow renegotiating the dynamics of the memoir's national and transnational "testimonial transactions" (Whitlock). In so doing, I demonstrate how the material envelope of *Something Fierce* serves to mobilize testimony's call-and-response dynamics, to revise the power-balance between the testifying subject and their addressees – asserting authorial agency and invoking audience's implication.

Keywords Agency, Autobiography, Canadian Literature, Ethics, Implication, Life Writing, Memoir, Paratext, Resistance Literature, Testimonio, Testimonial Transactions, Transnational Literature.

Cited Names Carmen Aguirre, Gérard Genette, Gillian Whitlock, Michael Rothberg.

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1 Carmen Aguirre's *Something Fierce: Memoirs of a Revolutionary Daughter* tells the story of the Chilean resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship, and its failed revolution. It is narrated through the eyes of adolescent Carmen, situated both as a testifying-subject and a witness to others' testimony.[1] The memoir articulates the urgency of remembering these events by threading them with past and present resistance movements within interconnected structures of oppression across the Americas. Framed and narrated as a coming-of-age memoir that explores the theme of "political commitment clashing with personal desire" (Aguirre 276), Aguirre reveals her personal resistance while uncovering a communal truth, sharing what the book's back cover describes as "a rare first-hand account of revolutionary life and a passionate argument against forgetting."

2 Alongside the editors, designers, marketing teams, and publisher involved in the production of the book, Aguirre sets the terms of engagement with her memoir by employing a host of enveloping materials that guide the national and global circulation and reception of her account. Strategically using varied components of book production—including the covers, epigraph, personal photographs, an epilogue, acknowledgements, and even an afterword added to the second edition of the book—*Something Fierce* mobilizes what Gérard Genette defines as paratext (1987, trans. 1997). Paratexts, Genette notes, are "thresholds of interpretation" that comprise both the materiality of a work and the materials that surround a work, functioning as sites of transition and transaction (9, 1). From the outset of the book—both as a material object, and as a story—the paratextual elements of *Something Fierce* shift the book from a private experience to a communal narrative, and from a personal secret to a political statement. This strategic shift matters because, in so doing, the book's material thresholds serve to make visible and revise the power-balance between the testifying subject and their addressees, asserting the speaker's agency while invoking readers' implication in her account.

3 I focus on the second edition of Aguirre's memoir, published by Vintage Canada in 2014, not because it is singular in the ways it uses paratext.[2] Rather, *Something Fierce* offers a case study for the ways that memoirists (and other cultural agents involved in the production and circulation of testimony) can and do shape reception by strategically positioning the testifying subject, invoking testimony's urgent call for justice, and framing audiences' roles as witnesses. More specifically, the paratextual thresholds of *Something Fierce* serve to intentionally mediate and navigate "the transactions of testimony," defined by Gillian Whitlock (2015) as the "transnational and transcultural passages of life narrative" that shape "its volatile currency and value" as embedded in global discourses of trauma, memory, and social justice (*Postcolonial Life Narratives* 1, 70). I trace the book's testimonial transactions to demonstrate the power of paratext as strategic sites of negotiation that assert the memoir's ethical stakes and political claims. The paratext positions *Something Fierce* as a *testimonio* that both unveils a secret story which contests

official histories and challenges premised power dynamics between testifying subjects and their addressees.

4 To establish Aguirre's use of paratext as navigating the transits of *Something Fierce*, I begin by exploring the use of material and rhetorical strategies to shift the book from personal memoir to collective testimony. I then turn to examine the book as situated vis-à-vis the discourse of testimony in general, and the genre of *testimonio* in particular. As I analyze the use of paratext to unveil the tensions between the personal and the political, the private and the communal resonances of testimonial accounts, I consider the ways that paratext can both highlight and obscure the intricate and varied power-dynamics embedded in the production and circulation of testimony.

5 Finally, to fully trace the testimonial transactions of *Something Fierce*, I conclude with a discussion of a pivotal and instructive moment of public reception among Canadian audiences. Specifically, during a debate on her book as the *Canada Reads* selection, Aguirre was accused of being a terrorist on a live Canada-wide national-radio broadcast ("2012 Day One" min. 33:54-35:43). *The Canada Reads* controversy demonstrates how the transits of testimony take shape across contemporary cultures, moving within and beyond the nation as what Whitlock (2007) names a "soft weapon"—formulating true stories of protest that aim to "make powerful interventions in debates about social justice" yet are easily "co-opted into propaganda" (*Soft Weapons* 3). In closing my analysis with this anecdote, I account for the ways the paratext of *Something Fierce* asserts this work of testimony as a cultural and historical record as well as an urgent claim for social justice that confronts readers with the limits of their nation's presumed foundational myths.

Transit and Testimony

6 Carmen Aguirre's memoir opens with a return. When Aguirre was six, shortly following the 1973 coup, her politically-activist parents were exiled and black-listed by Augusto Pinochet's regime, and the family had landed as refugees in Vancouver. Six years later, in June 1979, 11-year-old Carmen and her younger sister Ale are at the Los Angeles International Airport with their mother. There, the girls learn that they are not going on holiday to Costa Rica, but are flying to Lima with their mother who is rejoining the Chilean resistance and taking her daughters with her. A decade after landing with her mother and sister in Lima, 20-year-old Carmen, who is by then an active member of the resistance, learns that the movement is dissolved. She steps out of a café in Buenos Aires knowing she must flee. The span of that decade is chronicled in *Something Fierce*. As it narrates Carmen's coming of age with the romance, curiosity, and the development of autonomy and agency, the memoir shares Carmen's deeply isolating life under cover, her yearnings for any semblance of safety or stability, and portrays the

personal, intimate effects of state-sanctioned violence, human rights violations, and civil liberties abuses—from the physical scars to the piercing sense of terror and paralyzing paranoia. Aguirre's story thus situates interpretations through the prisms of *Bildungsroman* or memoir genre conventions, psychoanalysis and trauma theory, or vis-à-vis the discourse of human rights. Each of these modes of analysis are predominantly focused on the act of articulating testimony and limit attention to readers' ethical responsibility to recognizing the account as true.

7 However, the book does not end with her exit from the café in Buenos Aires in February 1990. While the story ends with political and personal defeat and yet another forced exile, the following page opens with another return. Dated February 2010, two decades after Carmen left Buenos Aires, the epilogue recounts her return to Argentina, where the failed Chilean resistance has become a mythological force, fueling current revolutionary and political movements across Latin America (267). In the epilogue, Aguirre threads the narration of her personal life since leaving the café in Buenos Aires with the contemporary political struggles and movements in Mexico, Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile in the two decades that passed since the disillusion of the Chilean resistance, ending with Che Guevara's call for action—"The struggle continues. Hasta la victoria siempre. Until the final victory, always" (274). With this call, Aguirre situates her memoir as a testimonial record of the Chilean resistance, a movement that, as she learns upon her return to Argentina in 2010, "has mythological status here … youth revere it … as a revolutionary movement of people who fought to the death for their beliefs, without compromise" (Aguirre 267).

8 The epilogue—alongside the afterword and acknowledgements—thus shifts the tenor of the memoir's subtitle to signal the voice of a *testimonialista*. Through this prism, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary Daughter* is no longer only the personal story of a daughter of a revolutionary, but rather the story of the revolution as narrated by one of its daughters. This is most evident in the acknowledgements, when Aguirre thanks "one of the founding members of the resistance, who, on his deathbed made [her] promise to tell this story, because it has not been told enough, because it is a story that must not die with the people who lived it" (287). This acknowledgment serves to assert Aguirre's position as a cultural agent who wasn't merely granted permission to share the story, but urged to record this history. The concluding paratextual elements thus serve to move *Something Fierce* from defeat to inspiring mythology, from personal experience to communal historicizing and memorializing, and from truth-telling to a call for action. When consulting these sections, readers learn that the book can no longer be read exclusively as a *Bildungsroman* or a memoir; it is a work of testimony, and positions its readers as witnesses to Aguirre's account.

9 The shift from memoir to testimony may seem inconsequential, yet, as *Something Fierce* demonstrates, it serves to radically shift the stakes at hand—invoking

real-life ethical and political implications of testimonial accounts. Creative works of testimony are urgent, direct, and performative speech-acts, in which "the subaltern [is] giving witness to oppression to a less oppressed other," by mobilizing truth-telling to protest ongoing exploitation and oppression (Spivak 7; Yúdice 17). The epilogue of ***Something Fierce*** directly articulates the memoir's urgency, cause, and call to action, situating the book as a testimonial account and bestowing readers with the responsibility of bearing witness to Aguirre's story. These responsibilities—of readers as witnesses—exceed the act of reading the story and recognizing it as true, invoking readers' "advocacy, responsibility, and accountability" as required in order to fulfill testimony's ethical demands and mobilize its transformative capacities (Whitlock, *Postcolonial Life Narratives* 9).

10 Scholars of literary, visual-art, and cinematic forms of testimony, including Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman (1992), Leshu Torchin (2012), Roger I. Simon (2014), and Gillian Whitlock (2015), have argued testimony's transformative capacity depends on what Kelly Oliver (2001) defines as the address-ability and response-ability of its audiences (15). And, as Margaretta Jolly (2014) further notes, given this dialogic nature of testimonial discourse—namely, its call and response dynamic—once testimony is shared, testifying subjects lose control over their testimony and its claim (6). The complete shift of power, from testifier to addressees means that audiences have both the responsibility and the privilege to mobilize testimony's transformative potential (Simon 19). But the communication of testimony or audiences' response do no occur in a vacuum, and the risks embedded in the shift of power are manifold—from addressees' refusal or denial of testimony's truth or testifiers' justice claims, to audiences' overidentification and appropriation, 'white savior' dynamics, and an array of affects such as shame, aversion, or fatigue. Testimony's justice claims and audiences' roles as witnesses are shaped by its movements across locations, cultures, and discourses, which Whitlock names as "testimonial transactions."

11 In ***Something Fierce***, Aguirre narrates her turbulent coming-of-age journey as entangled in the neo-colonial dynamics and histories that have shaped transnational and transcultural relations across the North/South axis of the Americas. In the epilogue, she tilts the genre frame as the personal narrative becomes a vehicle for the communal, political story. Using the epilogue to situate her ***Bildungsroman*** memoir as a true story that attests to the life of a movement and invokes an urgent and direct call to action, Aguirre does not merely fill the gap of the two decades between the end of the story and the publication of the book, nor position it solely as a testimonial account. Rather, Aguirre uses the epilogue as part of a web of paratextual materials that serve to situate her text as narrating a communal story, assert her authorial agency, and resist the risks of reproducing colonial dynamics by invoking readers' implication in current neo-colonial structures of dispossession and discrimination that traverse the Americas.

Strategic Thresholds of Resistance

12 Aguirre's use of the epilogue flags the function of enveloping materials—otherwise known as paratext—as sites of negotiation and transaction between herself and her readers. Genette's paratext is comprised of peritext (i.e., everything between the covers including title and author's name, preface, chapter titles, or epilogue) and epitext (namely, materials that are originally produced outside the book but in direct relation to it, such as interviews, letters, reviews) (8–9). Whether within or beyond the covers of a book, paratext serves to mediate the consumption of a text in its own terms, formulating an edge rather than a hard boundary which functions as a threshold "not only of transition but also of transaction" (Genette 1).

13 Originally published by independent Canadian press Douglas and McIntyre in 2011, Aguirre's memoir attests to the colonial trajectories of dispossession and abuse in Latin American dictatorships to a Western (and presumably mostly Canadian) readership. It is thus situated primarily within a transnational framework vis-à-vis the discourse of human rights and Western liberal values. Sidonie Smith and Kay Schaffer (2004) demonstrate that when interpreted within the framework of human rights, the relationality of testimony is managed through affect-based transactions and remains contained as an individual or private "ethics of recognition," which sustain "asymmetries of power: [as] the powerful bestow recognition onto the powerless" (Schaffer and Smith 232). In this sense, while life narratives that attest to rights violations and abuse are necessary grounds for social change (Schaffer and Smith 226), an ethics of recognition, as Kimberly Nance (2019) argues, might "indeed encourage [readers] to 'feel more' … [but] they do not necessarily feel obligated to do anything" (5). Through the prism of human rights claims, the epilogue's threading of the Chilean resistance with the Zapatista movement, the Bolivarian revolution, or Palestinian struggles, would be compartmentalized as separate issues that are contained in specific temporal or local frames. Yet, from the memoir's content, to the book's material thresholds, and the author's justice claims, the testimonial act of ***Something Fierce*** demands otherwise. It invites engagement that attends to relationalities—from Aguirre's resistance kinships, to the relations between communities and their governments, and the relationships between cultural producers, texts, and readers. The book's subtitle, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary Daughter*, highlights these intricate resonances of relationality already on its cover.

14 Alongside it, the opening fringes of the book (from outer and inner cover images and illustrations, and a poetic epigraph) situate Aguirre's testimony vis-à-vis specific historical, intellectual, and literary traditions of resistance which she threads across the Americas. The first page features a dedication of the book to Aguirre's son and in memory of her stepfather Bob Everton, who was a Canadian national that joined the mother and daughters to participate in active resistance to the Pinochet regime (Aguirre 6). Following the dedications, the book includes

an epigraph that excerpts Christina Peri Rossi's *Estado de Exilio* (2003; trans. *State of Exile*) both in the Spanish original and the English translation. *Estado de Exilio* is part of Peri Rossi's autobiographical poetry collection, written in Spain during the early years of her self-exile from Uruguay following the banning of her works in the aftermath of the country's military coup. By dedicating the book to the memory of her stepfather and opening with Peri Rossi's poem, Aguirre invokes the tradition of "resistance literature" even before the memoir's opening scene. Barbara Harlow (1986) defined resistance literature as works that emerge from "political conflicts between Western and non-Western … resistance movements" (qtd. in Kaplan 120). The category of resistance literature, according to Caren Kaplan (1992), "renegotiate[s] the relationship between … personal and social history" and encompasses a variety of literary forms, including both prison writing and testimonial literature (130, 119). Situating her account vis-à-vis traditions of urgent truth-telling, political resistance, and the exigencies of social justice, Aguirre mobilizes the opening peritextual thresholds to position her testimony within particular geopolitical and historical narratives, walking the tightrope between façades and reveals.

15 This framing shapes another key peritextual element of the memoir: its three sections, titled "The Return Plan," "The Fall," and "The Decisive Year." These section titles trace the linear progression of events, through what initially seems as mere thematically temporal references. However, while the latter two section titles are indeed solely thematic, the first section title is a critical historical reference. When Pinochet overthrew Salvador Allende's Chilean government in a military coup d'état in 1973, Aguirre's parents were blacklisted and exiled for their socialist activity. "The Return Plan" section title is the first (and possibly only) reference that guides readers toward recognizing the actual organization which Aguirre and her family belonged to, inviting readers to do active interpretative work that threads Aguirre's personal story and Chile's (or by extension the region's) political history.

16 Because Aguirre's story does not commence with being exiled, but rather upon a return to active resistance in Latin America in June 1979, the title situates the family's personal return in the political context of her story, noting that "1979 had been deemed The Year of the Return" and that she then understood what her family have been doing in Lima, grasping the danger they were in given the full swing of Operation Condor (49). The "Return Plan," Aguirre states, was an international recruitment order to former and new members of the Chilean resistance, calling them to return to active resistance in cells reinstated in Chile and its neighboring countries (Aguirre 49). While Aguirre references the Return Plan only twice during the memoir, each is coupled with references to Operation Condor. The Operation, as Patrice McSherry (2005) argues, was both "a secret strike force of the military regimes" in Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia,

Paraguay, and Brazil which "signified an unprecedented level of coordinated repression in Latin America," as well as a clandestine strategic component of the USA's "politicized doctrine of internal war and counterrevolution that targeted the enemy within" (3, 1). When discussing the Return Plan, Aguirre describes Condor from the perspective of revolutionaries, as an operation "set up by Pinochet and the surrounding dictatorships to catch revolutionaries operating anywhere in South America. … [It was] officially denied by the governments in question, but foreigners in Peru were disappearing all the time" (22). With this description, Aguirre strategically ties hushed community histories with official national narratives and transnational power dynamics. The section's title thus allows Aguirre to walk the line between situating the specific socio-historical contexts and protecting the safety of the community whose story is shared in the book, while guiding readers to consider their relation to both the North and South American contexts and the intricate imperial and neocolonial power dynamics between nations and communities across the Americas.

17 These paratextual breadcrumbs may be interpreted as simply another aspect of Aguirre's theme of façades, which is established in the opening scene when the mother tells the girls: "[w]e were never going to Costa Rica, actually, that was a façade" (4). However, when "The Return Plan" is considered alongside the other opening material thresholds they formulate a site of transition and transaction that demarcates the limits of Aguirre's truth-telling and the scope of her façades—delineating what she fully discloses and what she maintains (somewhat) private, thus asserting her own authorial agency even after her testimony is shared. In so doing, the paratext mobilizes what Cynthia Franklin and Laura Lyons (2004) articulate as testimony's crucial role as "a narrative remainder:" testimony's work to "scrape away at the sediments of official history to reveal a different body of evidence, one with the potential not just to change the historical record but also to dismantle the state's intricate machines of untruth" (ix, xx-xxi).

18 The body of evidence coded into the testimony's opening peritext and text operates to record continental power dynamics, as well as formulate both creative and political acts of resistance. Discussing Chilean women's memoirs, Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle (2020) notes that the tradition of Chilean women's "writing-as-resistance" subverts the state-imposed roles of womanhood, narrating "women as self-aware, resisting subjects," and formulating a counter-manual to "asceticism espoused by the National Secretariat of Women manual" (119). This resisting-subject is the one that Aguirre narrates throughout her memoir, and it extends beyond her own subjectivity. The first resisting-subject of the memoir is Carmen's mother, who resists the orders of the Return Plan—while "many other women [who were] going back to join the resistance… [have] left their kids behind or sent them to Cuba to be raised by volunteer families," Carmen's mother brought her daughters with her, because "children belong with their

mothers" (5-6). As the memoir shares the story of her mother and that of other Chilean female resistance mentors who entered Carmen's life along the way, in the peritext, Aguirre further establishes her position within a national and familial tradition. In the acknowledgements, Aguirre admits that though the book tells her mother's secrets, it was while writing it that she learned her grandmother's story. In the memoir, the grandmother is a central character, often positioned as foil to the revolutionary mother. The grandmother remained in Chile after the coup, and through Carmen's several visits, the matriarch is portrayed as fulfilling the models of female identity espoused by the NSW. However, it is only in the acknowledgements, that Aguirre discloses her grandmother had, in fact, aided the resistance as a messenger, starting from the early days of the coup until the disillusionment of the movement (286-287). It is thus the coupling of the memoir alongside the peritext that situates Aguirre's work concurrently as the individual narrative of identity formation, as an act of "writing-as-resistance," and as a revolutionary act that makes the personal and private into a political and collective account, deeply rooted in a tradition of Chilean revolutionary women.

19 The book's assertion of a communal voice and its centering of relationality, alongside its work to "scrape away at the sediments of official history to reveal a different body of evidence" (Franklin and Lyons xxi), positions *Something Fierce* within a specific tradition of testimonial acts—namely, the tradition of the *testimonio*. John Beverley (1988) observed that *testimonio* is a component of Harlow's "resistance literature," and while "testimonio-like texts have existed for a long time at the margin of literature," the current formations of the genre developed in close relation to movements of national liberation, especially in Latin America of the 1960-80s, embodying the New Left and feminist slogan, "the personal is the political" (93-94). The slogan is further reflected in *testimonio*'s assertion of collectivity: as "each individual *testimonio* evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences"; rather than narrate "a 'decentered' subjectivity … *testimonio* constitutes an affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode" (Beverley 96-97, italics in original). This collectivity is key to the transnational transits of *testimonio*, since, as Laura Beard (2009) highlights, it is the collective mode of *testimonio* which formulates it as an "act of narrative resistance" that "uncover[s] mechanisms of oppression and lay[s] out paths toward political and social change" (111-112). In *Something Fierce*, peritextual materials contour the interplay of personal and collective registers of *testimonio*, serving to uncover oppression and resistance, mobilizing the memoir as a record of the movement's story ***and*** as a site of confrontation that challenges readers to consider their role and responsibility as witnesses to testimony.

Weaponized Transits

20 *Testimonio*'s collective voice isn't merely established in the concluding peritexts. Throughout the memoir, Carmen develops her sense of self not merely in relation to her matrilineal line of revolutionaries or her community of the Chilean resistance, but also as a member of a much wider tapestry of freedom-fighting movements in Latin America. In the concluding peritextual components—the epilogue, afterword, and acknowledgements—Aguirre emphasizes the urgency of her account by asserting her justice claim and call to action, as well as widening their temporal and geographic scope. Perhaps even more importantly, in these sections she asserts the narrating voice, her autobiographical "I," as plural: "in using the word 'I' in relation to the word 'revolutionary,' I was demystifying a term that has been reserved for untouchable idols [like Che Guevara]. I was never interested in writing about heroism or martyrdom; I was compelled to write about ordinary people who made extraordinary choices" (276). A few pages later, when reflecting on her role as the testifying subject and the responses of Chileans in Canada to her memoir, Aguirre notes, "It was not my story; it was theirs. It had never been mine to keep; it had always been mine to tell" (280). In the acknowledgements, she states the permissions of her compañero Alejandro, and her family, but perhaps most revealing are the permissions of her mother and one of the founding members of the revolution. Whereas Aguirre shares that the latter urged her to tell this story, to record it so it is no longer silent, Aguirre thanks her mother for allowing her "to write [her] own version of the story, and in so doing reveal [the mother's] secrets" (286-287). With these statements Aguirre does not claim the position of a representative voice, but rather highlights the familial and communal resonances of her work. In other words, she mobilizes the liminal position of the peritextual voice—no longer that of her adolescent version as the narrator of the memoir, but still a crafted and mediated version of author's real-life personal voice—to assert the polyphonic stance of her *testimonio*, affirming her "individual self in a collective mode" (Beverley 96-97). In this sense, the politically transformative potential of Aguirre's memoir, understood as *testimonio*, is encompassed in the tension between the individual story and communal history, between her individual voice and collective subjectivity.

21 *Something Fierce* demonstrates how this tension can be strategically negotiated and mediated in the material thresholds of a text, offering readers multiple entry points that resist interpretation of the book as strictly a personal memoir. The peritextual material of *Something Fierce* illustrates its role as a *testimonio* that invites readers to bear witness to the political and ethical legacies of the Chilean resistance to Pinochet's dictatorship. Attuned to the tension between the personal and communal registers of *testimonio*, Patricia DeRocher (2018) notes that the genre utilizes "first-person plural narratives to relay a macrosocial critique in a microsocial, affective register," and mobilizes them "to rearrange well-worn

bourgeois narratives and replace them with radical social visions of justice for all" (16). This process, DeRocher argues, asserts *testimonio*'s role as "cultural weapon" (16). While DeRocher is attuned to the ways *testimonios*' "first-person plural voice" and subversive narratives position such texts as potential "cultural weapons" (16), consideration of the work of paratext in *Something Fierce* and critical engagement with its testimonial transactions, asserts it as what Whitlock (2007) calls a "soft weapon." Autobiographical accounts, Whitlock argues, move as a weapon because "to attach a face and recognize a refugee is to make powerful interventions in debates about social justice, sovereignty, and human rights." But it is 'soft,' because autobiography "is easily co-opted into propaganda … frequently not the violent and coercive imposition of ideas but a careful manipulation of opinion and emotion in the public sphere and the management of information in the engineering of consent" (*Soft Weapons* 3). The weaponizing potential thus moves through *Something Fierce* as story and commodity, as text and object.

22 From the front cover to an illustrated map and three inner covers (corresponding with the memoir's three sections), *Something Fierce* utilizes the coupling of image and text to serve as a body of evidence as well as invoke its strategic production and potential circulation as a "soft weapon." The most compelling of these textual-visual couplings is on the front cover of the memoir's second edition.[3] The Vintage Canada edition features a black and white photo of a teen girl sitting on the entry steps of a house, wearing white ballerina-flats, a white skirt, white elbow-length gloves, and an elegant sweater, her hair straightened and styled, and she is wearing earrings. The author's name appears below the image in black. The subtitle appears as a single line at the bottom of the cover, and in between, the text "Something Fierce" is in black and white over a red background as if revealed under a torn piece of paper which also "uncovers" an illustration of six raised fists. Situating a personal image of the author, alongside her full name, and a title that invokes a life writing genre (i.e., memoir), the cover verifies *Something Fierce* as a personal true story of a real individual. It thus fulfills the oft-cited use of paratext in autobiographical publications as a mode of authentication, setting in motion what Philippe Lejeune (1975, trans. 1989) defines as "the autobiographical pact," namely, an informal agreement between author, reader, and text which situates a life narrative as truthful based primarily on a host of peritextual elements (4-5, 10-11). In this sense, the book cover demonstrates the crucial role of paratext for the consumption of life narrative, serving as "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text" (Lejeune qtd. in Genette 1).

23 Concurrently, however, the second-edition cover also utilizes the visuals to assert *Something Fierce* as a *testimonio*. Juxtaposing the highly bourgeoise image of young Aguirre as portrayed in the photo, and the politically-charged illustration of torn paper uncovering a message (the main title) alongside image of raised fists, the Vintage Canada cover makes visible the tensions between

"bourgeois narratives" and "radical social visions of justice for all" (DeRocher 16). Discussing memoir covers, Leigh Gilmore (2015), suggests that when audiences are required "to read across the verbal and visual" they are asked to attend to the tensions between the peritext and the text. Borrowing the prevalent mode of reading enacted in graphic literary genres, Gilmore argues that the meaning-making work produced in the gap between the verbal and the visual (known as "the gutter" in comics) is "a site of effort and unpredictability" where readers are invited to formulate an ethical response that resists universalizing and nuances the understanding of a testimony's truth (106-107). Gilmore notes that while the gutter does not promise the production of an ethical response, its importance is in fostering participation, an active mode of reading as an "ethically charged encounter with the not-me: not through the swift action of closure, but via critical attention gained by taking note of the peritexts' claims upon us" (107, 115). When considered alongside DeRocher's work on *testimonio* as a "cultural weapon," Gilmore's attention to covers as setting in motion an engaged practice of sequential reading helps to spotlight the importance of paratext across a number of dimensions: as an authenticating mechanism (Lejeune), a permeable "threshold of interpretation" (Genette), and as a tool for shaping reading into an "ethically charged encounter" (Gilmore).

24 In other words, even before opening the book, the visual design of *Something Fierce* makes visible that this is both Aguirre's life story and a material object that was not created by the author alone, but rather alongside the labor and influence of graphic designers, editors, and publishers. When considering that the work of *testimonio* is to uncover and circulate hidden histories, "evok[ing] an absent polyphony of other voices" who cannot tell the story, and "narrating the individual self in a collective mode" (Beverley 96-97), the involvement of cultural agents as mediators of testimony becomes a crucial dimension of analysis. Traditionally, *testimonios* are understood as an "as-told-to" narrative: often identified "as a genre that 'gives voice' to the (presumed illiterate) subaltern through the mediation of an editor, anthropologist, or other intermediary" (DeRocher 118). Though this is only one possible form, the prevalence of the mediated "as-told-to" convention of *testimonio* serves to re-assert the power dynamics embedded in the relationalities of testimony. In other words, in traditional forms of the genre, since the testifying subject lacks the cultural capital to be heard by their Western addressees, *testimonio* necessitates a mediator who has both the authority and agency to codify the account and voice the call for justice and action. Nonetheless, as George Yúdice highlights, in *testimonio* "the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity" (17), thus mobilizing the cultural capital of true stories to formulate an "act of narrative resistance" (Beard 111).

25 As the host of paratextual materials establish, while there are varied mediating cultural agents involved in strategically navigating the book as a "soft weapon," Aguirre is both the author of her account ***and*** a creative professional who holds cultural capital among Western (primarily Canadian) audiences. In addition to the front and inner cover images of young Aguirre, the author's biographical page at the back of the book presents a close-up black and white image of an adult Aguirre (by Paul Dzenkiw), while the third-person text positions her as an award-winning "Vancouver-based writer and theatre artist" (n.p.). The cover and author bio are perhaps the paratextual components most overtly designed and mediated by parties other than Aguirre, both serving to frame the tension between Aguirre's positions as a subaltern testifying subject ***and*** a Western cultural agent, as the voice of a *testimonio* and the narrator of a memoir. In other words, the peritextual components that juxtapose visual and textual strategies demonstrate that mediating cultural agents may hold just as much power as the testifying subject to shape the transits of testimony, mobilizing both literary and material aspects of memoirs' production and circulation for the framing of reception, thus strategically managing testimony's capital as a "soft weapon."[4]

26 In this sense, the strategic positioning of Aguirre as shaped by the web of peritextual thresholds of *Something Fierce* is significant because it mobilizes the collectivity of *testimonio* to resist and potentially revise these and other power dynamics. The collective voice of *testimonio*, Doris Sommer (1988) notes, "is a translation of a hegemonic autobiographical prose into a colonized language that does not equate identity with individuality. It is thus a reminder that life continues at the margins of Western discourse, and continues to disturb and to challenge it" (qtd. in Kaplan 125). When extended to and asserted through the material thresholds of *Something Fierce*, the tensions between the individual and communal registers of *testimonio* renegotiate the power dynamics of memoir's testimonial transactions. Situating *Something Fierce* at the intersection of memoir and *testimonio*, the peritext makes visible and encompasses the potential to resist and revise the power imbalances between the testifying subject and mediating agents, the narrator and their community, and between the author and her implicated addressees—directly asserting her own agency even after her testimony is shared and in the hands of her readers.

Between Call and Response: Agency and Implication

27 The question of authorial agency is one that lies at the heart of testimony in general, and of *testimonios* in particular. A formal close reading of Aguirre's memoir would attend to the narration of agency as one focused on Carmen's choice to return to Latin America on her own volition and join the Chilean resistance as an active member, taking the resistance oath at the "age of eighteen years and seven months, seated in a Lima café" (Aguirre 193). However, when consulting

the peritext of *Something Fierce*—extending Aguirre's experiences and reflections beyond Carmen's coming-of-age in resistance—the question of authorial agency extends to the multiple and intricate registers of relationality between the author, the testifying voice, the community whose story is shared, cultural mediators, and the memoir's readers.

28 Across the peritextual sections of the Vintage Canada edition, Aguirre interlaces locations, temporalities, and communities, illustrating to readers the political and ethical efficacies of her justice claim and the urgency her call to action. The epilogue and acknowledgments introduce multiple figures of revolutionaries (such as her mother, other *compañeros*, or members of current movements) alongside those who support or stand in solidarity with resistance movements (like her uncle Boris, or her grandmother). And as the epilogue references the "thirty-three miners trapped [underground] in Chile's Atacama Desert... because of dangerous working conditions" in October 2010, it ends with the assertion of the ongoing struggle for freedom—"until the final victory, always" (273-274). The acknowledgements, then offer a response to this call, articulating a closing statement of solidarity with those who still fight worldwide, from Gaza, to Mexico, India, and Bolivia (287). Aguirre thus positions her transition from revolutionary to a community member standing in solidarity with resistance movements across the world, while concurrently suggesting to her readers what it means to honour others' testimony and fulfill what Whitlock notes as the "advocacy, responsibility, and accountability" required of readers as witnesses (*Postcolonial Life Narratives* 9).

29 The concluding peritexts situate *Something Fierce* as a "deliberative testimonio," defined by Nance as a form of *testimonio* that uses diverse strategies of persuasion to articulate audiences' "ethical responsibility not only to listen, but also to help" (9). While the epilogue and acknowledgements make the legacies and resonances of the Chilean resistance urgent and relevant right now, it is the afterword that drives Aguirre's justice claim and brings her call-to-action home to Canada. Dated December 2013, and nestled between the epilogue and the acknowledgements in the Vintage Canada edition, the afterword brings the work of solidarity and continued resistance to Canada and Canadians—introducing readers to the story of the memoir's reception, making it (and readers) an inseparable part of her testimony. While the epilogue and acknowledgements explicitly make the struggles of others at other places relevant to the time and place of the book's publication, the afterword directly positions Aguirre's readers as witnesses implicated in her *testimonio*. It carries the collective voice, even while it illustrates the tensions embedded in Aguirre's positioning and testimony, narrating her experience writing the book while fearing the act of truth telling, alongside the story of the memoir's reception.

30 Discussing the circulation and reception of the memoir, Aguirre introduces the epitext into the peritext, including the story of the book between the covers of

the book, admitting that despite positive reception (including multiple offers for the memoir's film rights), the book did not sell—flatlining at 1500 copies, and leading the original publisher to decide not to print a paperback edition. That changed when *Canada Reads* picked the book for its 2012 season (277). In the afterword, Aguirre narrates the events surrounding *Something Fierce* in *Canada Reads* 2012, and shares the effects of her truth-telling act as well as the responses to its urgent rights claims. The first response she shares is that of panelist Anne-France Goldwater, who, minutes into a live broadcast on national radio, accused Aguirre of being "a terrorist who should have never been allowed into Canada" (278). Goldwater's statement establishes that she indeed recognizes Aguirre's story as true, and identifies its call to action as well as her responsibility to respond to the call. But it also demonstrates the extent of readers' power—as both responsibility and privilege—in the transactions of testimony, positioned as the powerful party who, in Goldwater's case, rejects Aguirre's call for active (including armed) resistance, weaponizing the author's call against her own testimony, invoking real-life effects for the author and her community. And indeed, these few seconds on live national radio strongly affected the author and her community, changing the trajectory of *Something Fierce*'s circulation and reception: thanks to the heated debates on *Canada Reads* the memoir became a "#1 national bestseller" (Aguirre 280).

31 When introducing this accusation as part of the memoir's story, rather than focus on Goldwater's statements, Aguirre confesses her own response to the public accusation: "I thought of repercussions, of the price to pay for telling this story at this particular time in North America, when the word 'terrorist' is not an abstraction but carries the weight of two towers toppling; a label that is not easily erased, that can and does destroy lives" (278). Aguirre's response to Goldwater stresses the high stakes of truth telling acts, and contours the limits of civil public debate about citizenship, inclusion, and Canada's multicultural myth. As Fuller and Rak (2016) suggest in their analysis of *Canada Reads* 2012, Goldwater's remarks and panelists responses to them, mobilize reading experiences that don't focus on the stories, but rather what the books tell readers about "what it means to *be* a Canadian citizen" (33). As Aguirre narrates her own reaction to Goldwater's accusation, as well as the very-real public backlash (resulting in a CBC-assigned security detail escorting Aguirre for the week of the debates) (278-280), she suggests that the stakes of truth telling thus lie not with governments but with readers and their engagement with testimony's claims. Those readers were primarily Canadians. As Aguirre admits, "[m]ainstream Canada read [the memoir] in droves, which is all [she] had ever wanted: for this secret story, which is the story of many people who call this country home, to enter public consciousness" (280). With these statements, Aguirre introduces readers as part of the community of her testimony, and as carrying forth its truth. In a sense, the afterword draws

attention to readers' role not merely as "the most important character in a book" (276), but more so, to their crucial role in mobilizing testimony; for, as Whitlock points out, "in the absence of its witness testimony fails; the sound of one hand clapping" (*Postcolonial Life Narratives* 68). In this section, Aguirre suggests that while the sound of two hands clapping is the aim of a testifying subject, the silence of one hand clapping is not because they were unable to construe the right witness in their text. In other words, the afterword highlights that it is not the testifier's responsibility to be heard, but rather, the responsibility of readers—including the agents of circulation and consumption—to learn to listen.

32 In telling the story of the memoir's circulation and reception through and beyond the events surrounding *Canada Reads*, Aguirre highlights the high political stakes and visceral ethical tensions between testimony's justice claims and its movement as "soft weapon." In the afterword, Aguirre attests to the intricate routes that tread the line between weaponizing testimony for change or propaganda—threading Goldwater's remarks and the events on *Canada Reads* alongside her own meetings with clubs of "CEOs of mining companies with large holdings all over Latin America," and young girls in an ESL class who were interested in the book as a dating manual, to readers in prisons, or Indigenous activists in Chief Teresa Spence's hunger-strike camp in Ottawa (282-3). As she draws the contours of readers' responses to her testimony—their affective registers, critical or informative questions, their expressions of solidarity, critique, or comradery—Aguirre, as a testifying subject, reclaims control of her testimony. Yet, the afterword is not narrated in self-defense, nor in an attempt to reframe her claims, or even critique readers' responses; rather, it shares the story of the book to introduce readers to the debates that the memoir invokes—whether deliberately or not—and their own implication in these conversations.

33 The rhetorical and paratextual strategies in *Something Fierce* invoke audiences' implication, in the ways it is asserted by Michael Rothberg (2019), who differentiates it from the oft-cited complicity, noting that implication accounts for ongoing temporality of relations, or, in other words, claiming that while "we cannot be complicit in crimes that took place before our birth," "[w]e are implicated in the past" (14). Implication, Rothberg notes, can provide a relational methodology, that highlights responsibilities for large structures of violence and injustice as well as shift notions of accountability away from legal or emotional conventions of guilt towards collective historical and political responsibility (20). By including the story of the memoir's production and reception between the covers of the book, Aguirre introduces readers to diverse and complex models of bearing witness to testimony, including both her own and her readers' positioning as implicated subjects.

34 She opens the afterword with a direct consideration of her own position as an implicated subject. Admitting that "it was a terrifying book to write," Aguirre

acknowledges the fear "was multifaceted: was it safe to tell the story? Would it hurt [her] family and community?" and would it put her life in danger? (275) But alongside these questions, Aguirre confesses she feared an entirely different type of backlash: "writing a personal memoir about being in the Chilean resistance would be seen as selling out, that the mere act of using the first-person pronoun would be viewed as individualist. In other words, unrevolutionary" (275). Aguirre complicates her own position as an imperfect testifying subject, who narrates the story of a revolution but perhaps is not worthy of the label "revolutionary"—whether because she accidentally became one (as a child brought up in the resistance), or because she writes through the prism of the Western genres of memoir and *Bildungsroman*, or perhaps, even worse, because she now stands to profit from sharing this story (either in terms of financial or cultural capital). It thus situates Aguirre as a subject whose act of speaking is implicated in the structures it protests, mobilizing neoliberal genres and their movement in capitalist markets while testifying to Marxist resistance and issuing social justice claims. Aguirre's reflection on the act of writing and the acknowledgement of her implicated position serve to transition her image from that of a subaltern testifying subject to that of a savvy cultural agent who recognizes the ways true stories, whether personal or collective, circulate as soft weapons.

35 Interlacing Aguirre's confession with her reflections on the book's reception, integrating the conversations surrounding the book as an integral part of the testimony, the afterword confronts readers with the very dynamics of testimony's volatile currency. This is particularly evident when considering the invocation of national mythologies. While the epigraph situates the Chilean resistance as a mythological force in contemporary South America, in the afterword, Aguirre positions the book as part of "broader Canadian mythology" (284). As part of the national mythology, ***Something Fierce*** is positioned vis-à-vis the nation's foundational myths of multiculturalism and peacemaking—encouraging readers to consider how Aguirre's ***testimonio*** both challenges and affirms these myths, what political structures these myths serve, how they may be utilized for propaganda, and readers' own implication in sustaining those structures through the stories they tell themselves of shared national values.

36 Aguirre's "broader Canadian mythology" comment may indeed seem to affirm her text as one that celebrates ethnic diversity in Canada; at least, within the confines of what Stanley Fish (1998) defines as "boutique multiculturalism"—an "appreciation/ recognition of legitimacy of the traditions of other cultures as long as these do not offend the cannons of civilized decency as they have been declared/ assumed" (69). It is a mode of multiculturalism that Himani Bannerji (2000) argues perpetuates "selective modes of ethnicization" and serves as mere re-branding of the mosaic policy "[as] the Anglo-Canadian core tolerat[es] other cultures/ ethnicities" (78). But, as Goldwater's remark indicates, Aguirre's

testimony requires readers to confront the limits of their own tolerance as they are asked to contend with Canada's peacemaker narrative—both in terms of the state's complicity-in or benefit-from the oppressive regimes Aguirre fights to dismantle, as well as in terms of a Canadian citizen (Aguirre) sharing a story of armed resistance. Paulette Regan (2011) defines Canada's peacemaker image as a strategic myth that promotes the idea that Canadians and the Crown established and sustained relations with Indigenous peoples in peaceful ways (11), an antithesis to America's narratives of formation through violence (34-35). The peacekeeping image, now a national archetype, Regan argues, is also reincarnated as a humanitarian myth, welcoming refugees in moments of global crises (107). This is precisely the myth that Goldwater invokes, both as the grounds for welcoming Aguirre to Canada as a refugee, and for the claims to her exclusion as a terrorist. Goldwater refuses Aguirre's call because, as a Canadian, she holds Canada's peacekeeping identity dear, and determines that the only ethical response is to reject armed resistance even in the face of living under oppressive regimes. It is with this move, and with Goldwater's inflammatory reference to Aguirre as a terrorist (whether as a gameshow strategy or a genuine argument), that the *Canada Reads* debates demonstrate how easily the circulation and consumption of testimony can co-opt it as soft weapon.

37 In rejecting Aguirre's call to action, Goldwater also refuses to consider implication, asserting the values of peacekeeping and multiculturalism as espoused in national mythology. But from the prefacing to the concluding peritexts, the book provides Canadian readers with a model that challenges the automated perceptions of the multicultural and humanitarian myths. Dedicating the book to her stepfather's memory, and his "exemplary internationalist life" (286-7), Aguirre introduces readers to a Canadian who, for her, embodied the myths their nation espouses (though others may see him as betraying them). While the dedication does not provide any information about Everton, apart from his name and the years of his birth and passing (1949-2004), Aguirre threads her stepfather's story in her own coming-of-age journey as early as the opening scene. When introducing Everton, the narrator frames him as a Canadian national who has traveled to Chile to support Salvador Allende's socialist elected government, and who was one of three Canadians to be detained for two weeks at the Santiago National Stadium, which became a concentration camp as Pinochet's military coup took place in September 1973 (6). Upon his release form the concentration camp, Aguirre notes, Everton returned to Canada and organized a sit-in in Ottawa, to pressure the Canadian government to offer asylum to Chilean refugees such as Aguirre and her family (6). Bob—the only Canadian character, and the only one whose full name is divulged in the memoir—accompanies Carmen's coming of age in the resistance, both providing cover for their family's façade and embodying the image of a global, revolutionary citizen.

38 Despite being the very first component between the book's covers, the dedication can be easily glossed over. But on the very last page of the book, near the closing of a lengthy acknowledgements section, Aguirre returns to Everton. She notes that he urged her to write the book and has been a guiding figure for her (286). Rather than position him as a personal father figure, Aguirre invokes Everton's life-long social activism, interlacing the personal and the political aspects of his identity, with distinctly Canadian resonances. Asserting his commitment to resistance at home and abroad, mobilizing his responsibility and privilege as a Canadian citizen to utilize both peaceful civic action alongside involvement in active resistance—Aguirre speaks directly to what many readers will identify as Canadian values—justice, freedom, and radical multiculturalism. With the inclusion of *the Canada Reads* controversy and other readers' responses in the afterword, alongside the acknowledgement of Everton's mentorship, Aguirre invokes the role of primarily Canadian readers and the Canadian nation-state as implicated parties in neo-colonial and neo-liberal structures of expansion and oppression under the guise of humanitarian and peacekeeping myths.

39 Through its strategic yet diverse use of paratext, *Something Fierce* demonstrates that the paratextual fringes of testimony hold the power to set the terms of engagement—invoking testimony's truth value, situating it within both national and transnational historical, cultural, and political contexts, as well as articulating the urgency of its justice claim. But while *Something Fierce* is far from the only account to use peritext in these ways, the memoir's rich and diverse tapestry of situated entry points serve as dynamic sites of transition and transaction which hold the potential to shift the power dynamics between the testifying subject and her addressees, asserting authorial agency even after testimony is shared, and confronting readers with their responsibilities as witnesses to this account. In producing an account of resistance that requires active modes of engagement which constantly (re)negotiate the power dynamics between testifier, mediators, and readers, from its front cover to the back, *Something Fierce* attests not only to the story of the Chilean revolution, but more so to the intricate routes of transaction that tread the line between weaponizing *testimonios* for change or propaganda.

Notes

[1] To distinguish between the author of ***Something Fierce*** and the narrator/protagonist of the memoir, I consistently refer to the former as Aguirre, and the latter as Carmen. When addressing the voice in the concluding sections of the book, I refer to Aguirre, in order to signal the self-reflexive voice of the adult author. That is due, in part, to the decades-long gap between the events narrated in the memoir (ending in 1990), and the dates assigned to the concluding components (the epilogue, acknowledgements, and afterword, all dated between 2010 and 2013).

[2] The book has two other editions. It was first published by Canadian independent publishers Douglas and McIntyre in 2011. The UK edition was published by Granta in 2012.

[3] The memoir's Douglas & McIntyre and Granta editions have different covers and do not include the Afterword. All other peritextual elements are the same as the Vintage Canada edition.

[4] To trace the ways in which cultural mediators of production and circulation – from editors, to graphic designers, or marketing teams, and publishers – have indeed shaped ***Something Fierce*** would require a form of genetic criticism, defined by Lejeune (2010) as "the study of the history of a composition" ("Genetic Studies" 162). Lejeune genetics is focused on the author's drafts, tracing variations in their representation of experience and memory, not as means of detecting falsification but rather as means of studying "two creative processes – one psychological and the other aesthetic" ("Genetic Studies" 164-165). I would suggest that while a applying a genetic approach to paratextual analysis would indeed require access to documents and correspondence shared between the parties involved in the publication of a memoir (and its varied editions), it's contribution for the study testimonial accounts lies in the potential to trace the influence of cultural mediators on the narrative itself and the material object through which it is shared. When considering such work not only as the editor's influence on the storytelling and structure of the narrative, but as including the uses, sequencing, and design of paratextual components, such expansion of the scope of genetic criticism's psychological and aesthetic analysis can account for the ways the power dynamics of cultural, publishing, and reading industries manage the circulation and reception of testimonial accounts, thus shaping their transactions as soft weapons.

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Biography

Dr. Orly Lael Netzer studies the ethics of mediating and reading life writing. Her work focuses on practices of reading as bearing witness to creative forms of testimony, the politics of empathy as ethical recognition, and the colonial legacies and trajectories of testimony.

Playing in the "Dirt": On Learning to Learn from Testimonial Encounters

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1 In December of 2019, award-winning author and educator Myriam Gurba turned to the academic blog *Tropics of Meta* to publish her scathing review of Jeanine Cummins' Oprah-lauded and highly marketed novel, *American Dirt* (2018). "Pendeja, You Ain't Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature," which was refused publication elsewhere for being "too negative," went viral for its critique of a text written by a white woman with a Savior complex claiming to speak for, according to Cummins, the "faceless brown mass" of migrants at the Mexican border. Gurba's dauntless essay called the publishing industry to task for uplifting these white authors who appropriate and repackage works by writers of color who are otherwise ignored by this industry. Gurba writes, "Cummins identified the gringo appetite for Mexican pain and found a way to exploit it. With her ambition in place, she shoved the 'faceless' out of her way, ran for the microphone and ripped it out of our hands, decided that her incompetent voice merited amplification." Cummins imagined that she could extract a lived historical reality and "give it voice" over the existing voices and narratives of those who embody it. Aside from earning the title of being the "biggest literary controversy of the decade (so far)," the tale of *American Dirt* showcases the troubling ease with which testimonial voices are appropriated and repackaged for popular consumption (Temple).

2 Gurba's timely critique draws our attention to how urgently we need to re-examine the ways that we read, write, and position ourselves in relation to the decolonial knowledge that is at the heart of testimonial writing – and of *testimonio* as a practice. Over the past few decades, Latina-feminist scholars and educators have moved examinations of *testimonio* away from the terms of

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the academic debates of the 90s in the U.S. academy and toward understanding *testimonio* as a model of methodological, pedagogical, and epistemological practice. In 2001, the Latina Feminist Group published *Telling To Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, in which they reclaimed *testimonio* as a tool "for Latinas to theorize oppression, resistance, and subjectivity" that takes place "within a *relational* framework" (17; my emphasis). This understanding of *testimonio* as a relational practice is crucial if scholars want to facilitate, as Orly Lael Netzer calls for in her article in this volume, "more responsible and accountable engagement with testimony." Furthermore, it is a framework for approaching testimonial writing that has grown out of the hemispheric Americas.

3 The contributions to this volume illustrate a model of "testimonial encounter" that places a relational framework, like that of the Latina Feminist Group's *testimonio*, at the heart of these American authors' literary practice. In highlighting the works of Armenian-American artists and authors, Talar Chahinian shows us the role that the testimonial encounter plays in cultivating a permanent sense of belonging within the fluid process of place-making after trauma. Jennifer Reimer's reading of Tarfia Faizullah's Seam foregrounds the "ethnographic" testimonial encounter as a process of learning to witness in a way that can attend to shifting borders and paradoxical perspectives. Joshua Deckman's essay spotlights Maya Chinchilla's work as roadmap for a testimonial encounter that establishes a shared emotional space for other diasporically-rooted Central Americans, one free of the violences of victimization and voyeurism. Finally, Orly Lael Netzer introduces us to Carmen Aguirre's testimonial encounter with her own readers.

4 Taken together, the work of these contributors highlights the need for a "testimonial turn" to the critical discourse of American Studies. A testimonial turn would mean attending to the contemporary prevalence of different modes of testimonial writing across the Americas. More importantly, it would mean a collective effort to examine how the practices of listening, reading, and engagement that we model and teach play a role in either aiding or disrupting the so-called "colorblind" consumption of racialized experience. Alicia Partnoy, a *testimonialista* in her own right, has alerted us that "the processes for seeking knowledge, the spaces for intellectual reflection on these matters, need to evolve. We can choose to continue training our students' imagination and our own... And, as many college professors already do, we can embrace Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *conocimiento* as 'coming to know the other / not coming to take her' (45)" (1667). In the educational spaces of our classrooms and our writing, we can help our audiences learn to more ethically, effectively, and collaboratively learn from testimonial writing.

5 Without re-examining our own practices of reading, learning from, and teaching testimonial writing, we will continue to enable a mode of consuming

literature that encourages bestsellers like *American Dirt*. Myriam Gurba explains precisely the kind of instrumentalized witnessing that Cummins' work models for audiences:

> Rather than look us in the eye, many gabachos prefer to look down their noses at us. Rather than face that we are their moral and intellectual equals, they happily pity us. Pity is what inspires their sweet tooth for Mexican pain, a craving many of them hide. This denial motivates their spending habits, resulting in a preference for trauma porn that wears a social justice fig leaf. ("Pendeja: You Ain't Steinbeck")

6 Gurba perfectly describes the impact of what Elizabeth Anker calls a "human rights bestseller," a narrative that reifies victimization and colonial viewpoints by deploying the tropes of sentimental literature (35). Learning to learn from the testimonial encounters these contributors have mapped will help us become better accomplices to the many modalities, embodied styles, and knowledges that make testimonial writing what it is. Learning to learn on the relational terms of these testimonial encounters will help prevent scholars and educators from being complicit in – as Anzaldúa warns – the "taking" of these voices.

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Biography

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