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# Bearing Witness: Testimony in Latin American Anthropology and Related Fields

*By*
Lynn Stephen
University of Oregon

## Resumen

El testimonio oral es un vehículo importante para ampliar el análisis antropológico: se abre y amplía quien legítimamente habla y se escucha en una sociedad. El testimonio es también un componente crucial en la producción de saberes y en la construcción del archivo histórico. En este artículo se refleja en el testimonio en relación a puntos que se tejen juntos cómo el testimonio sirve para construir nuevos conocimientos y modelos analíticos: testimonio y sus roles en la alfabetización indígena a través del tiempo; la trayectoria del testimonio de la narrativa heroica individuo a narrativas de colaboración / colectivos; el género, el testimonio y la resistencia a la lógica del sistema de género colonial / moderno; y el poder del testimonio de influir en la percepción de la historia y los acontecimientos; la antropología y la movilización de testimonio en el testimonio de expertos. [Centro America, derechos humanos, genero, Mexico, migracion]

## Abstract

Oral narrative and in its narrower form, oral testimony, is an important vehicle for broadening anthropological analysis: it opens up who legitimately speaks and is heard in a given society. Testimony is a crucial component in knowledge production, archiving, and amplification. This article reflects on testimony in relation to how testimony serves to build new knowledge and analytical models: its role in indigenous literacy over time; its trajectory from heroic individual narrative to collaborative/collective narratives; gender, testimony, and resisting the logic of the colonial/modern gender system; archiving, and the power of testimony to influence perceptions of history and events; and anthropology and the mobilization of testimony in expert witnessing. Testimony is a key epistemological tool for alternative knowledge production in the

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field of Latin American and Caribbean anthropology and in decentering the normative geopolitics of knowledge. [Central America, gender, human rights, Mexico, migration]

In May 2015, I was honored to deliver the Latin American Studies Association (LASA)/Oxfam America Martin Diskin Memorial Lecture at the annual meeting of the LASA in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The Martin Diskin Memorial Lectureship is offered at each LASA International Congress to an outstanding individual who combines commitment to activism with rigorous scholarship. LASA is the largest professional association in the world for individuals and institutions engaged in the study of Latin America. With over 12,000 members, nearly 60 percent of whom reside outside the United States, LASA brings together international experts on Latin America from all disciplines and diverse occupational endeavors (LASA 2016).

Delivering the lecture helped me to reflect on the mentoring I had received early in my career from Martin Diskin, a cultural anthropologist who taught at MIT, who was a pioneer in the field of Central American Studies, modeling collaborative research with ethical and political accountability. I worked with him on a project involving the politics of asylum for Central American refugees in the U.S. I also worked as a paralegal while writing my dissertation and was involved in helping hundreds of families qualify for the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) that allowed about three million people to regularize their immigration status in the United States. I also worked on several dozen political asylum cases from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua—work I continue today.

The title here, "Bearing Witness," captures Martin's commitment to close, detailed observation as an anthropologist, to convey depth of feeling, emotion, passion, trauma, and loss, as well as political analysis. An extension of bearing witness is found in the concept of testimony, and although Martin's work used testimony as a source of information and data, he did not engage in detailed analysis of this form of oral and written expression, knowledge production, and archiving.

For several decades, much of my work has been with indigenous peoples in Mexico, Central America, and with indigenous immigrants in the U.S. As a graduate student, I learned Zapotec in Teotitlán del Valle from a variety of teachers—mostly older women. With hindsight, I now recognize that the way I learned from my Zapotec teachers was as important as what I learned—much of which came to me by way of oral narratives in Zapotec, in some cases elicited and in other cases shared as explanations or illustrations. Since much of the world's population, particularly women, still shares information by oral and visual versus

textual means (through speech, radio, video, and film), the acts of "telling," "speaking," and "listening" constitute the basic mechanics of how publics are formed. Part of decolonizing anthropology has been to explore the strategic and analytical tools for broadening our perspectives to incorporate the worldviews and epistemologies of those who have not been included in "theorizing" (Hernández-Castillo 2016). Oral narrative and, in its narrower form, oral testimony—as the retrospective public witnessing of a history that is "essentially not over" and "in some sense brought into being by the (itself interminable) process of testimonial witnessing" (Feldman and Laub 1992:7)—is important for broadening anthropological analysis: it opens up who legitimately speaks and is heard in a given society. Testimony is also a crucial component in knowledge production, archiving, and amplification. It is a key epistemological tool for alternative knowledge production—decentering the normative geopolitics of knowledge—in the field of Latin American and Caribbean anthropology and beyond.

The textualization and digital dissemination of testimonial narratives can determine whose voices are heard, remembered, and recycled—and by whom. Linking memory to the social practices of communication is crucial to understanding how social memory is crafted in different contextual moments through time, depending on the social and political conditions in which it is deployed. Documentation of testimonies at a particular point in time does not freeze their meaning or significance: each time they are recited, read, and remembered, they acquire new meaning in a new context. In this way, social memories have distinct, ever-changing relationships over time. Rather than trying to equate social memory and testimonies with specific events at a point in linear time, we can thus regard social memories as flexible containers that operate in circular, layered, or even spiraled fields of time. Much of indigenous theorizing happens in this process.

Here, I reflect on testimony to show how it builds new knowledge and analytical models. I examine testimony and its roles in indigenous literacy through time; the trajectory of testimony from heroic individual narrative to collaborative/collective narratives; gender, testimony, and resisting the logic of the colonial/modern gender system; archiving, and the power of testimony to influence perceptions of history and events; and anthropology and the mobilization of testimony in contemporary expert witnessing. We need to know the history of testimony and indigenous literacy and knowledge production before we can engage with how testimony has functioned in Mexico and Central America and in the U.S. asylum system over the past several decades. This article, then, combines my personal history as an anthropologist with insights about testimony from my research over the past three decades, in conversation with others who have made important contributions to its study and use.

To narrate. To testify. To witness. Oral testimony refers to an account of an event or experience as delivered through a speech act. It is an oral telling of a person's perception of an event through seeing, hearing, smelling, and other sensory information. It signifies witnessing, from the Latin root "testis," or witness. Testimonials are performative and public: they join together memory and knowledge replication. Testimonies share some characteristics with oral history in involving the speaker's personal experiences, but unlike oral history, which can involve recording, preservation, and interpretation of the past—as well as recordings of songs, stories, myths, and other forms of knowledge—testimony focuses on an account of an event or experience delivered through a speech act. Biography, which is the story of a living person's life as written by someone else, is also distinct from testimony, which is told in the first person. With a definition of testimony established, what is known about how testimonies function today, including historical considerations?

Prior to the Spanish conquest, indigenous peoples in Mexico had several types of writing that have since been found in codices, maps, and glyphs on architecture. Recent research on indigenous literacies during the colonial period suggests we should discard the notion that indigenous literacy was either lost to what became an entirely oral circulation of indigenous languages or that indigenous peoples are only recently shifting from an oral to a written culture (Faudree 2013). For example, Rappaport and Cummins (2012) suggest that Andean peoples received and subverted the conventions of Spanish pictorial and alphabetic representations. They note a broad understanding of literacy that links alphabetic, pictorial, oral, and corporeal elements, including oral performance. Citing Diego Valadés' work on memory, *Rhetorica christiana* (1579), they observe that his "visual alphabet" is not directed toward reading or writing a text, but is meant as a tool for recalling from memory texts that can be recited out loud. The alphabet and literacy were thus visual and part of orality. The two forms of literacy, visual and alphabetic, were mediated by orality—a practice common to Spaniards and natives alike (Rappaport and Cummins 2012:8).

Historians Mark King and John Monighan have suggested that Mixtec codices—which comprise nearly half of the surviving books from before the Spanish conquest—can be treated as scripts or scores for performances (King 1994:102–103):

> In determining how the information ... may have been broadcast ... the codices were, in all probability, based on oral traditions ... King (1988) forcefully argued that they were produced with the intention of being read aloud. This suggests that the information within the codices was made available to wider audiences through their presentation in a public form, and that we should be looking at these

documents not solely as comic strips to be read, but also as scripts to be performed. (Monaghan 1990:133)

Sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, founder of the Andean Oral History Workshop, has also written about the need to consider nonalphabetic forms of indigenous Andean discourse through iconography and oral sources. She suggests that oral and iconographic sources deliver new epistemologies that shed light on colonial and postcolonial Andean experiences (2015).

The work of these researchers suggests the long-standing ways in which oral performance and forms of literacy are interconnected in indigenous communities and histories. Because indigenous languages have a long history of being used orally, performatively, and even in writing (at least by elites) until the mid-1800s, we should analyze testimonials in a way that considers all these dimensions.

## From Collective Voice and Heroic Individual to Collaborative Narratives

My first experiences with recording testimonies (primarily in Zapotec, with some in Spanish) were as a graduate student writing on what I would now call an intersectional analysis of gender in Teotitlán del Valle. Frequent references to specific features of the local landscape in recounting events alerted me to the importance of visual as well as oral elements in testimonial narratives. Social memory as constructed through testimonials mobilized multiple elements that come together through the speech act of testimony.

I was also working as a paralegal in Boston, Massachusetts, where I took declarations in Spanish from Central American refugees seeking political asylum in the United States. Later, I translated for visiting Salvadoran and Guatemalan human rights activists. In one instance, in 1991, I was translator for María Teresa Tula of the Co-MADRES of El Salvador. During that year, we began recording 40 hours of her testimony, which was edited, translated, and published in 1994 as *Hear My Testimony: María Teresa Tula, Human Rights Activist of El Salvador* (Stephen and Tula 1994, 1999).

At this time, the model for testimonies was that of Rigoberta Menchú. I was also familiar with testimonials in Native American literature, and in African American slave narratives; in Latin America, the first genre of testimonial was formally recognized in 1970 in Cuba's Casa de las Americas Center literary prize. El Salvador's premier testimonial was Roque Dalton's *Miguel Marmol*, published in 1982; it covered Marmol's life from 1905 to 1954. During the 1970s two other testimonials appeared in El Salvador, written by leaders of the *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN). Several testimonials published in the 1980s—Claribel Alegría's, *No me agarran vivia: La mujer salvadorenia en la lucha* (1983) and NidiaDíaz's *Nunca Estuve Sola* (1988)—anticipated Tula's testimonial. While the content of

these testimonials offers a collective perspective on history through the eyes of one person, and many of the authors eschew the personal pronoun *I* in favor of *we*, many of these accounts are told through the actions, persistence, and hope of one particular person; indeed, such was the framing of Tula's testimonial. In this way they are also heroic narratives of survival and overcoming—of obstacles and experiences. They open up cultural and public space, talk back to official state versions of events and histories, and script alternative historical narratives in courtrooms and in social memory.

While it is often assumed that testimonial editors/anthropologists are engaged in unequal power relationships, it is not that simple. Producing testimonies was and is the work of the Co-MADRES and similar organizations. They used testimonies to gain access to a wide range of human rights organizations in Latin America, the U.S., and sections of the U.N. To claim that much of the power in a testimonial collaboration resides with the recorder is to underestimate the skill of people such as Tula, who use oral testimony as an epistemological, legal, and political tool. Tula often noted that many aspects of her life were left out of the book. We read aloud, reread, and argued over many passages that were revised as she requested. The power relations involved in recording, editing, publishing, and disseminating life histories and oral testimonies are complex (Lebrecque 1998; Zavella et al. 2001).

In the years since *Hear My Testimony* was published much has happened in terms of our understanding of how to craft collective and collaborative narratives. For example, in the six initial collaborative projects on indigenous and Afro-descendent cultural politics in the first round of LASA's Otros Saberes project, 2004–14, indigenous and Afro-descendent organizations and academics (most often anthropologists) produced collective narratives in the form of reports, videos, and academic chapters, which were focused on a strategic priority in the life of a community, organization, or social movement. Some important lessons are highlighted in the introduction to the *Otros Saberes* book, which I co-edited with Charlie Hale (Hale and Stephen 2013). Recentering indigenous, Afro-descendent, and non-western systems of knowledge, models of leadership, and understandings of the world, and putting them into dialogue with the western epistemic tradition, can result in important insights and conversations. This form of bearing epistemic witness to multiple knowledge systems generates a collaborative narrative based on many overlapping testimonies. In the process of bearing epistemic witness, we may observe the specifics and variations of knowledge found at local levels—even knowledge differences between extended family members. Being able to "hear" these differences and bear witness to subtle levels of differential knowledge enriches analysis. We can also open ourselves to ways of knowing that include dreaming, shamanism, the reading of signs from animals and plants, listening, watching, and practicing versus believing all knowledge and truth exists in texts. While this might seem like old-fashioned anthropology, it is in fact a proposal for new ways

of theorizing and producing knowledge that do not fit within standard, western knowledge categories.

My experience with the Otros Saberes project and prior collaborative research projects in Oregon led me to discussions with participants in a significant Oaxacan social movement in 2006, as well as with citizens who opposed the movement. In June 2006, a group of teachers exercised their right to bargain for higher salaries; they occupied Oaxaca City's historical colonial square. This became a widespread social movement after state police attempted to evict the teachers by force. Marches of thousands, the creation of a coalition of organizations known as the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO—Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca), the occupation of state and federal buildings, the takeover of the state's television and radio station, the construction of barricades, as well as regional movements throughout the state questioned the legitimacy of the government and resulted in an assertion of rights. The APPO interrupted the usual functions of the Oaxaca state government for six months and began to construct a parallel police force, constitution, and state assembly structure geared toward a more inclusive and participatory political vision. It was met with strong repression. At least 23 were killed, hundreds were arrested and imprisoned, and over 1,200 complaints were filed with human rights commissions (Stephen 2013). Those opposing the movement included artisans, merchants, hotel owners, and others affected by a loss of tourism income, as well as state officials.

In 2016, the movement gained further traction as teachers protested against education reforms that ignored the conditions of poverty, scarcity, and increasing inequality that educators encountered in many rural, indigenous communities. The movement spread to other Mexican states, and teachers were joined by indigenous municipal authorities, health workers, and others who were annoyed by the growing inequality, violence, and impunity of police, army, and state officials in relation to disappearances and assassinations in Mexico.

From 2006 to 2012, while writing *We Are the Face of Oaxaca: Testimony and Social Movements* (2013), I had many conversations about what kind of research project to engage in, what methods to use, what results would be desirable, and what kind of collaborative process could work given the constraints of time, resources, and location. Initial conversations focused on the urgency of responding to human rights violations and the need to disseminate perspectives ignored by the mainstream media. The project continued for several years and incorporated many different optics on the 2006 social movement. I recorded video testimonials that were first organized as a website launched in 2009 and then incorporated into a larger website linked to a book and conceptualized as a testimonial archive.[1]

In consultation with human rights workers, teachers, and others, we prepared draft versions of the testimonials recorded in audio and video, subtitled them,

copied them to DVD format, and then reviewed them with the people who provided them. This last step in our methodology proved to be important: not only did we discuss what people's video testimony would look like and make the changes they wanted; we also gained opinions and ideas about how to improve the website and the conceptual framework for the book. This consultative process led us to videotape interviews with experts in and leaders of movements for teachers, women, and human and indigenous rights, as well as key spokespeople in local community TV, radio, and other popular media production. We added video testimonials of indigenous participants in the movement from other locations, including Juxtlahuaca in western Oaxaca and Los Angeles (Burres and Harding 1997; Maclagan 2006).

I also recorded about thirty testimonies from people including teachers, and others who had been illegally detained, tortured, and imprisoned for their political activities, as well as from women who had participated in the takeover and reprogramming of radio and TV stations. I recorded testimonies from those who were not part of the social movement but were strongly affected by it, including working-class mothers and housewives, middle-class professionals, students, business people, and artisans—not all of whom supported the movement.

This form of providing testimony—of witnessing, of retelling events and experiences from 2006—was a visceral and emotional experience for everyone. The witnessing aspect of testimony and its communication of experiences of suffering and violence creates what Colombian anthropologist Myriam Jimeno calls emotional communities, which can help survivors of violence recover: it can become a means of "political and cultural recomposition" (2007:169). The emotions generated by testimony connected people who watched visual reproductions of public witnessing, not just those who were physically there. The urgency with which everyone talked about 2006 almost always resulted in long stretches of reflective narration and the recall of events, feelings, and emotions, which included a strong identification with being *Oaxaqueño* (Oaxacan), interpreted, of course, from many different perspectives and with multiple meanings.

As I immersed myself in the narratives I recorded, shared as transcripts with our participants, and edited as videos, I was struck by the importance of testifying—not only for individuals, but also for the social movement. This was evident in video recordings of public events and radio broadcasts. The power of oral testimony was amplified not only emotionally for those who did the telling and listening, but also through its reproduction in multiple forms, as it was recorded, broadcast, textualized, and then disseminated along multiple transmission channels. I observed a form of knowledge production that drew from oral archives of knowledge and reproduced them in conjunction with written and visual forms.

## Gender and Testimony: Resisting the Colonial/Modern Gender System

One of the issues I have considered at length is how testimony intersects with gender and other categories of difference. Over three decades working with the Zapotec community of Teotitlán del Valle, I have observed the referential integration of landscape, the body, the natural world (plants, animals, water, mountains), and the cosmos (de la Cadena 2010). This holistic worldview often permeates other categories, including gender, and pushes against strict dichotomies. I learned that the daily-life world of people in Teotitlán could not be divided into public and private spheres or into clear sets of consistent statuses and sources of "empowerment" for men and women (Stephen 1991).

The rootedness of these people in the geography and landscape they have inhabited for at least 2,000 years, their well-founded claims to being "the first Zapotec population" (Burgoa, Relaciones Geográficas), their collective cosmovision and history, and their generational, family, and life trajectory differences were the lenses through which gender was reflected, refracted, and constructed—suggesting that it is never the only or even primary way that social relations are built, experienced, and interpreted. More recent history suggests that state formation after the Mexican Revolution, male and female movement and migration, and the commoditization and globalization of their textiles produced complex and intertwined formations of race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and differential transborder legal statuses that produce different kinds of gendered realities (Stephen 2005).

Drawing on the work of feminist philosopher María Lugones, gender is a colonial introduction constituted simultaneously with race (2007). In order to understand how testimony works through gender, we need to understand how gender is co-constituted with other categories of difference and embodied through specific narrative performances. Gender, race, class, ethnicity, and other historically mutual categories are read onto the human body and encoded in legal and social structures and cultural codes. Lugones's project focuses on making visible the instrumentality of what she calls the colonial/modern gender system and providing a way "of understanding, of reading, of perceiving our allegiance to this gender system" and ultimately of rejecting it (2008:1–2). She explains that modernity "organizes the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogeneous, separable categories" (2010:742). Perceived reality, she suggests, is organized into "dichotomous categories in relations of opposition: mind/body, public/private, reason/emotions, men/women, white/black. Each term of any oppositional dichotomy stands in an evaluative relation to the other" (2014:1). In the logic of Teotitlán Zapotec spoken narratives, however, this perceived reality is often not parsed into these dichotomous categories: while they influence daily life, they are not the sole or strongest organizing logic of life. It is beyond the present brief article to explain how I am not orientalizing Zapotec logic: suffice to say, a number

of anthropologists have recently made the same point. Here, I wish to emphasize how the speech act of testimony, in Teotitlán and often elsewhere, permits a non-dichotomous logic of gender that illuminates how gender is built from many elements in a specific context.

Building on the work of women of color feminists such as Kimberly Crenshaw (1995), Lugones suggests that we must reconceptualize the logic of intersectionality to avoid separability—the separation of categories of difference. Race and gender, for example, are not discrete, overlapping categories as in a Venn diagram. If we see the categories of race and gender as separate then we may only see the dominant group as the norm: "'women' picks out white, bourgeois women, 'men' picks out white bourgeois men, "black" picks out black heterosexual men" (2008:4). We only actually *see* women of color, Lugones suggests, if we move outside the category logic that underpins the way that women of color are theorized in the modern, colonial gender system: those not perceived as categorically homogeneous disappear (2014:2). We must move beyond hierarchical dichotomies and logic to make women of color visible. Lugones suggests that we search for nonmodern (not premodern) knowledges, relations, and values and ecological, economic, and spiritual practices "that are constituted as at odds with a dichotomous, hierarchical, 'categorial' logic" (2010:743). She uses the term "nonmodern" to avoid incorporating categories that are assumed to be "normal" in modernity and offers other types of knowledges and relations. What does this mean for testimony and the act of testifying?

Oral testimony as an embodied speech act permits people to represent personal histories within fused/inseparable identity categories of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. When people testify they represent themselves in all of their complexity. That is why the content of testimony should be considered a tool of knowledge production. One example is Fidelia's testimony: we met in a radio station in Oaxaca City, which was occupied by dozens of women on August 5, 2006. Her speech act of testifying (below) positions gender in relation to a series of other constitutive self-identities:

> I am a woman born in Oaxaca of Zapotec and Mixtec blood. We Oaxacan women ask that a woman be treated with the same rights as a man. Our mission as women is to create, educate, communicate, and participate. That is why we are here occupying the state radio and TV station . . . From the countryside to the city, we Oaxacan women are tired of bearing alone this burden of the repression we are experiencing from the long line of people who have governed us and from our current governor, Ulises Ruiz . . .
>
> We went out into the streets on 1st August to tell Ulises Ruiz that he had to leave Oaxaca. We are women who don't usually have a voice because we are brown, we are short, we are fat, and they think that we don't represent the people, but we do.

> WE are the face of Oaxaca . . . It is too bad that the government doesn't recognize the greatness, the heart, and the valor of the women who are here. We are here because we want a free Mexico, a democratic Mexico, and we defend the TV station and radio. (Fidelia Vázquez, at the Corporacíon Oaxaqueña de Radio y Televisíon, August 5, 2006, Oaxaca)

Lugones and Vásquez offer suggestions about how to theorize testimony and how gender is fused with race, ethnicity, and other categories through the colonial/modern gender system. Fidelia's testimony also resists how she is framed in the colonial/modern gender system: she places herself outside those logics. She and other women demand that they be seen, heard, recognized, rendered visible, and granted authority as representatives of a contemporary peoples—"El Pueblo de Oaxaca."

Strategies of representation are presented in the physical speech act of testimony, its codification in text and audio and on video, and the ways that testimony travels. Rather than separating gender from other constitutive elements of identity, the testimonial suggests a complex rendering of an individual and of gender. As the representation of the individual travels and is embedded in other contexts—in a truth commission, a law court, or a classroom; on a YouTube video, television news, the radio—the reproduction of that individual puts gender and other elements into a broader framework. A testimonial's content may rub against a new context and suggest new ways in which the constitution of gender and other identities and experiences needs to be rethought. This may be a self-conscious effort on the part of the testifier, or it may be something that happens beyond their sphere of influence or thought. The point is that gender and its constituent parts are remade through the speech act of testimony and then through its re-rendering in different contexts. In the words of Lugones, Fidelia's testimony and its codifications represent enactments that defy the logic of dichotomies, honor multiplicity, and suggest a coalitional logic (Lugones 2014). How then does the logic of multiplicity in testimonials influence models of knowledge production and archiving?

## Venues and Archiving: The Power of Testimony to Influence Perceptions of History

In *We are the Face of Oaxaca*, I (Stephen 2013) draw on the work of Diana Taylor in performance studies. Taylor (2003:24) locates the discussion in the tension between the concepts of the archive and the repertoire:

> The archive includes, but is not limited to, written text. The repertoire contains verbal performances—songs, prayers, speeches—as well as non-verbal practices. The written/oral divide does, on one level, capture the archive/repertoire difference I

> am developing in so far as the means of transmission differ, as do the requirements of storage and dissemination. The repertoire, whether in terms of verbal or nonverbal expression, transmits live, embodied actions. As such, traditions are stored in the body through various pneumonic methods, and transmitted "live" in the here and now to a live audience.

Taylor proposes that performance studies enable us to "take seriously the repertoire of embodied practices as an important system of knowing and transmitting knowledge" (2003:26); we should also explore the performance of repertoires as part of knowledge archives. Taylor's methodology suggests ways that we can understand testimonials as they are narrated in real time and space and then take on second, third, fourth, and even infinite lives through their travel in the press, in performances, on the Internet, radio, and television, in gossip, and in other forms of human codification. Testimonials as recorded and disseminated by human rights workers and reporters are excellent examples of oral narratives that are important parts of knowledge archives. In research on the Oaxaca movement, I found that the historical archive created through testimonies resulted in new ways of organizing driven by social media, in horizontal relationships and forms of decision making, in the rights to speak and be heard, in participatory democracy, in women transforming public and commercial media, in embodied critiques of power, in hybrid forms of urban racial and ethnic identity, in indigenous and nonindigenous alliances, in creative strategies for claiming rights, in occupying metaphorical and physical space, and in challenging inequalities.

Oral testimony enables people to bear witness, archive their memories of wrongs committed, and represent complex identities and experiences. Testimonial narratives are also effective as literary devices in fiction writing and in hybrid forms. In a current project, I analyze the role of Elena Poniatowska as a public intellectual and cultural and political actor in Mexico. Her powerfully crafted political *crónicas* (see below) challenge the state's "official stories" regarding key historical events in contemporary Mexico, and broaden historical truth and social memory to include many perspectives. In addition, such crónicas may even influence powerful political figures such as presidents.

In contemporary Mexico, *crónica* refers to shorter essays written as reports for newspapers or to longer journalistic pieces written in a polished literary style, sometimes described as testimonial narrative. The crónica is a major genre in Mexican letters that has no counterpart in English (except possibly in a few *New Yorker* essays—although even these do not emphasize testimonial narratives as crónicas do). In Mexico, the crónica serves as a bridge between politics and culture. Poniatowska excels in both short and long forms of crónicas; analysts of her early career (as a journalist who specialized in interviews) credit her with inventing the

Mexican crónica style and a unique style of fiction built on real life characters and situations.

Oral testimonies are key ingredients in her longer crónicas. Oral testimony as used by writers such as Poniatowska thus becomes a vehicle for broadening historical truth through opening up who legitimately speaks and is heard in a given society. Sixteen years after Poniatowska published her crónica (*Nada, Nadie* 1988) on the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, and the powerful social movements that accompanied it, Miguel de la Madrid, who was president at the time of the earthquake, published *Cambio de Rumbo* (2004). Subtitled *Testimony of a Presidency, 1982–1988*, de la Madrid's book directly engaged with Poniatowska's account and the testimonies of key social and political actors included there. His engagement with the testimonies suggests the power that the textualization and reproduction of oral testimony can have on the interpretation and social memory of historical events.

Poniatowska's crónicas, testimonial novels, and other writings have been crucial in broadening Mexican historical truth as she documents narratives that rise from the streets. Fellow chronicler Carlos Monsiváis (1987) points to Poniatowska's *La noche de Tlaltelolco* (1971) and *Fuerte es el silencio* (1980) as seminal contributions to the contemporary genre of Mexican chronicles. Beth Jörgenson, a long-time analyst of Poniatowska's work, writes that the contemporary Mexican chronicle, which is "perched on the threshold between literature and advocacy, narrative, and essay, document and figure, elite and popular culture and investigation and advocacy . . . makes a contribution to democratizing culture and to imagining a more inclusive and authentic democracy" (2012:5).

In her discussion of what she terms crisis chronicles, Beth Jörgenson comments that both Carlos Monsiváis, in *Los días del terremoto* (2001) (Days of the Earthquake) and Elena Poniatowska, in *Nada, nadie: Voces del temblor* (1988) (Nothing, Nobody: Voices of the Mexico City Earthquake) not only document the tragedies suffered by thousands of people, but also "delve into existing structural factors that cause or exacerbate catastrophic events and the potential for a constructive challenge to the status quo" (2011:143). In fact, this is a fundamental characteristic of all of Poniatowska's crónicas and is part of the way her written works as well as her public persona have contributed to the transformation of Mexican politics and society.

Linda Egan suggests that cronistas such as Monsiváis and Poniatowska specifically position themselves to report on sites of struggle and social movements—an observation with which many would agree. She suggests that crónicas can be understood as critical mirrors of a society "caught in the act of re-inventing itself . . . but the cronista, practicing what has aptly been called transformational journalism, will choose to report on thematic sites where struggles over power implicitly contain the greatest potential for change" (2001:88). Thinking of crónicas as

critical mirrors makes sense, particularly in their ability to reveal structural causes of inequality and injustice through a literary form that uses storytelling to convey this information. The movement between the author's first person voice and the third person voice of others narrating what happened to them is one of the conventions that makes this possible.

Unlike newspaper stories that may be thrown away and are thus short-lived (at least until the advent of digital archiving), the gathering of individual stories and testimonies into books gives the book form of the crónica a different life. How do crónicas contribute to social memory? Can we consider them as part of the material that enables people to rewrite history, tell it from different perspectives, and in fact disrupt linear narratives of history by connecting "past" events with events in the present?

Common-sense understandings of western history show that events happen in a linear fashion with one experience following another. Studies in the humanities of how social memory is constructed, however, emphasize that memory of the past is influenced by the context of the present (Fentress and Wickham 1992; Samuel 1994). In fact, the act of "remembering" joins the past with the present: "to have or keep an image or idea in your mind of (something or someone from the past): to think of (something or someone from the past) again; to cause (something) to come back into your mind; to keep (information) in your mind: to not forget" (Merriam Webster Dictionary 2015). To remember connects a person to the linguistic skills linked to oral testimony and to participation in a speech community. The act of remembering an event through testimony acquires its meaning only in the context of the specific interpretive practices and framework of a community of speakers (Backhurst 1990).

Linking memory to the social practices of communication is crucial to understanding how social memory is crafted in different contextual moments and changes through time, depending on the social and political conditions in which it is deployed. Documentation of testimonies at a particular point in time does not freeze the meaning or significance of those testimonies. Each time they are recited, read, and remembered, they acquire new meaning in a new context. In this way, social memory can be thought of as having ever-changing and distinct relationships with time. Rather than trying to equate social memory and testimonies with specific events at a point in linear time, it makes more sense to think of social memories as flexible containers that can operate in circular, layered, or even spiraled fields of time.

This takes us back to the epistemologies of native peoples that I began with. Rather than assume that time is linear and that humans exist on one plane marked by a distinct past, present, and future, the knowledge systems of native peoples such as the Mexica (Maffie 2014), Maya (León Portillo 1990), Nasa (Rappaport 1998, 2001), and Kahnawake Mohawks (Simpson 2014) can link the past, present,

and future through one event, or one feature of a landscape that marks a significant occurrence, a ritual, or a map. These varied models of time and how time links to specific material (landmarks, ritual objects, art) and speech (testimonies of events, genealogies, prayers) objects provide important models for how the crónicas and their testimonies link to historical events and processes that are remembered, canonized, and challenged, as well as shaped and reshaped.

Poniatowska's mobilization of testimonial narrative in her writing and activism, in tandem with the work of others, has been significant in building alternative national narratives around events such as the repression of the 1968 student movement, the citizen response to the 1985 earthquake, and the 1994 Zapatista movement. By weaving testimonial narratives into fiction, Poniatowska's work has a powerful impact on her readers. Her writing and the testimonial narratives she codifies and disseminates have influenced public perceptions in Mexico of certain key historical events: they have broadened the scope of historical narrative and memory.

Similarly, the 2006 Oaxaca movement testimonials were broadcast on radio and television, shared at public demonstrations, on the streets, at barricades, around kitchen tables, in prisons and human rights offices, and in front of soldiers, police, and government officials. Testifying significantly repositioned many previously excluded speakers as active citizens who could speak, be heard, claim rights, and develop as new political subjects. One of the key organizing tasks taken on by many sectors of the movement—either consciously or unconsciously—was to create venues where people could tell the story of how they came to realize what was wrong, could conceive of themselves as capable of recognizing what was wrong, and of articulating what should be. This created a community where those wronged in similar ways could dream in similar ways of how to make things right. The resultant community of others, in the case of Oaxaca, became El Pueblo de Oaxaca.

Testimony is essential for creating experiences and feelings of a passionate politics, which is central to how people live and feel collective struggle. Illuminating this emotional engagement requires scaling down to reveal the pivotal, emotive moments for individual activists in their personal development. It also requires scaling up to look at how collective identities move beyond specific individuals and organizations and take on an independent ideological life in relation to other public political discourses and ideologies (Brodkin 2007).

The analysis that activists create can be legitimized in temporal and/or structural circumstances (as in Oaxaca in 2006) that create an opening for a new political narrative to emerge and be heard and validated by other political actors. By studying the forms of knowledge production that activists engage in, and the processes by which they become inserted into the political and cultural mainstream, we can understand how public discourses change or are challenged. Testimony as a form

of knowledge production and its archiving on audiotape or videotape, in text, or in the brain, is an important epistemology for understanding the formation of the new political identities behind processes of rights-claiming and the broadening of concepts of citizenship and political participation.

**The Politics of Expert Witnessing for Central American Migrants and Refugees**

Expert witnessing combines the expertise of testimony through its "ontological status as a report of conditions 'on the ground' in hidden, inaccessible, and dangerous sites" (Tate 2013:58) with the credibility of academics that relates to their training and professional recognition. Academic expert witnesses are thus seen as providing objective forms of analysis such as data, statistics, and theory (Andreas and Greenhill 2010; Carr 2010; Greenhalgh 2008; Tate 2013:58): "accepted as legitimate policy knowledge by some, testimonies are delegitimized by others as anecdotal and lacking analytical rigor" (Tate 2013:58). Cultural anthropologists as expert witnesses can potentially disrupt the discrediting of testimonies through their doubling as academic experts who rely on research and first-hand data in combination with testifying and using data to buttress and interpret the testimonies of others, usually one person at a time. At the same time, reliance on an academic expert to "support" the declaration of a person in either a criminal or immigration trial automatically highlights a series of differentiating frames that exist between the two actors and what they represent. At the highest level is a prioritization of ontologies. The academic expert performs a representation of modern science based on supposed objectivity, gathering evidence from all sides, and on interpretation accredited by a western academic institution and higher educational degree. In this frame, the "story," "declaration," or "affidavit" of the defendant is not necessarily validated on its own terms—either for the specific life experience or information it contains, or for the system of knowledge it represents. The academic expert may make assertions based on ethnographic research—which itself involves observations, watching stories in action, the solicitation of narratives, conversations, focus groups, and other forms of people talking that is repackaged from testimony to "ethnographic data." In acting as expert witnesses, cultural anthropologists are often called upon to simplify complexity, make culturally based arguments, and to educate judges.

For some cultural anthropologists, the use of expert witness reports increases the ability of indigenous and others to access formal justice systems (Guevara Gil et al. 2012; Valladares 2012). Some legal anthropologists argue that expert witness reports reproduce hierarchies of knowledge, legitimizing the anthropologist's cultural knowledge as superior to that of people petitioning in court. It is the anthropologist, they argue, who holds the legitimate cultural knowledge

recognizable by the administrators of justice and, as such, has the last word regarding what is a "true indigenous cultural practice," or "true indigenous law," in cases where indigenous systems of governance and justice are questioned. The anthropologist's role as translator for the judge can be complicated and perhaps compromised by having to accept the rules of legal discourse, where the complex and contextual perspectives of anthropological analysis are often considered to be out of place (Betancourt 2012).

This work requires walking a fine line between trying to disrupt what are often racial, ethnic, national, and gendered stereotypes while providing nuanced, contextual information, and working with a lawyer to build a convincing case that will sway a judge. This tightrope walk raises important questions. For example, what are the implications in propagating a defense such as "Central American gang refugee" when a deeper analysis reveals that the children fleeing gang violence and seeking to reunite with parents in the U.S. are part of the same system that pushed children to join gangs for protection in the first place (Zilberg 2015)? In many of the criminal and political asylum cases I have been involved with as an expert witness the stakes are high—often life or death, when deportation to violent conflict regions is likely to result in death or great harm.

There are also challenges in the arena of the politics of knowledge production and representation: to discuss these, we must take a longer historical view. I do so here in relation to the recent "humanitarian crises" of women and child refugees from the Northern Triangle Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Since the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan, the U.S. has crafted a set of integrated policies that continue in different and more severe forms into the present. U.S. economic and security policies create categories of people from Central America and Mexico who can be systematically excluded from the U.S. by being labeled as dangerous, criminal, undeserving, and having lower social and human worth than U.S. citizens. At the same time, these same policies facilitate the entrance of large numbers of people into the U.S. with uncertain immigration status; they work as laborers (albeit unwittingly) consolidating neoliberal models of trade and governance. Today, these policies converge with the current border defense policy of "Prevention through Deterrence," which pushes migrants and refugees into dangerous desert corridors, causing death and injury (De Leon 2015).

In June 2014, U.S. President Obama termed the presence of more than 50,000 Mexican and Central American unaccompanied children who had crossed the U.S.–Mexico border since October 2013 a "humanitarian crisis." During fiscal year 2014, U.S. Customs and Border Protection reported apprehending 68,541 unaccompanied minors, a 77 percent increase from the previous year. Seventy-five percent of the unaccompanied children apprehended in 2014 were from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Stinchcomb and Hershberg 2014:6). Most of

the remaining children were from Mexico. While in fiscal year 2015 apprehensions of Central American unaccompanied minors on the U.S.–Mexico border decreased due to increased deportations from Mexico to Central America and a U.S. public information campaign to discourage children from coming, during the first six months of 2016 (October 2015–March 2016), the numbers spiked again to 27,754 minors (Krogstad 2016).

In 2014, 68,445 family units were apprehended at the U.S. border. In 2015 these numbers decreased, but rose again in the first six months of 2016 to 32,117 families (Krogstad 2016). The thousands of undocumented women who were part of this migration were largely invisible in most media depictions. Like the children, undocumented women are often fleeing conditions of violence, abuse, poverty, and hunger. Importantly, they are also seeking to reunite with family members. For Central American children surveyed who were deported back to El Salvador, a majority reported that the primary reason they had made the difficult journey from home through Central America, Mexico, and into the U.S. was to be reunited with their parents (Kennedy 2014).

Under the 2008 William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, unaccompanied minors from countries that do not border the U.S. are processed differently to those from Mexico or Canada. A majority of Mexican minors "consent" to voluntary departure and are transported back to Mexico within 48 hours (Stinchcomb and Hershberg 2014:28). In the case of unaccompanied children from Central America, however, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agents are required to transfer custody to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) within 72 hours. This is required regardless of whether a child may be eligible for relief as a victim. Then two contradictory processes take place: Homeland Security initiates removal processes; and ORR, acting in "the best interest of the child," places the child in detention settings of shelter care, staff-secure care, or short-term foster care. ORR staff then determine whether a child can be reunited with U.S. family or an adult sponsor. About 85 percent of children are temporarily released to their families while they are waiting to hear about the outcome of their immigration claim (ORR 2014).

The 2002 Homeland Security Act mandates that the ORR develop a plan so that children in custody receive access to legal representation. Studies show that having legal representation greatly increases a child's chances of remaining in the United States. A review by the Transactional Records Access Clearing house (TRAC) of 100,000 juvenile cases in immigration courts between 2005 and June 2014 showed that "90 percent of children appearing without an attorney were ordered to leave the U.S." With an attorney, a child's odds of remaining in the U.S. went up to nearly 50 percent (Stinchcomb and Hershberg 204:31). Many women and children who potentially should receive legal counsel are unlikely to do so. Those who do

receive it often work with lawyers who seek to bolster their case with cultural experts—often cultural anthropologists.

Since 2014, I have received dozens of requests to work on such cases as a cultural expert. I have completed twenty cases and continue to work on at least a dozen more. I have also declined many cases because of lack of time or for other reasons. I now turn to the question of the politics of knowledge production and representation in expert witnessing and the role of testimony in that process.

In April 2015, I worked with a lawyer to secure asylum for a young man based on the death of several of his nuclear family members and on well-documented death threats against him over a long period of time. He was from Guatemala. The lawyer sent me this request:

> I am preparing an asylum application for a client who is 18 and who fled Guatemala when he was threatened by a gang that if he did not join they would kill him. He knows several other young men from his community who have been killed. I am looking for an expert who can explain the extent of the gang's control and power in Guatemala, and particularly how refusal to join a gang/resistance to gang recruitment and refusal to cooperate can be deemed a political opinion.

I have also worked on gendered asylum cases for young women, which included gang violence as part of the context; there were also clear examples of complex intermeshed systems of structural and family violence. I have become concerned, as have other cultural anthropologists who are asked to perform expert witnessing about the production of asylum categories that expunge the history of U.S. political, military, and economic intervention in Central America and convert that history into one of mutual security, defense of the rule of law, and economic development (Speed 2015; Zilberg 2015).

In a recent article, anthropologist Elana Zilberg analyzes the category of "Gang War Refugee," which began to appear in immigration courts in the early 2000s. She writes that attorneys began to seek expert testimony that would "bolster the claim that these youth, in addition to fleeing very specific threats faced by an individual, constituted a 'social group' targeted by gangs for forced recruitment, extortion, sexual violence and murder" (2015). Zilberg suggests that until recently it was almost impossible to win asylum as a "gang war refugee":

> To grant asylum to these petitioners (based solely on the category of gang war refugee) would be to acknowledge the failure of U.S. immigration and law enforcement policy, not to mention the failure or lack of will on the part of the Salvadoran state to protect Salvadoran citizens. This ironic twist at work in the emergence of this new class of refugee brings us back full circle to the 1980s and to the return of the repressed in more than one way: the ongoing participation of the United States in the production and reproduction of violence in El Salvador. (2015)

This happens through zero-policing campaigns known as *mano duro* (hard line) that increased the homicide rate and put a record number of young men in jail.

Many of us seek to insert our expert testimony in the context of a complex set of historical, political, economic, and cultural factors binding together the U.S., Mexico, and Central America. Here, the concept of transborder does important work in suggesting how policies and practices of border defense, securitization, and militarization affect people living in the spaces of migration networks and multisited communities.

As migrants and refugees move across these borders in Central America, Mexico, and the U.S., they are also moving in a globalized culture of militarization, which has been consolidated and expanded in the region through U.S. government support of the Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Mexican states and militaries. Regional policies and strategies of security, economic growth, drug interdiction, and labor recruitment work in tandem with militarization. Some of the results of this integration include the extension of patterns of militarized violence from armies to police in both the U.S. and Central America (Zilberg 2011) to organized crime and back again (Garzón-Vergara 2013; Santamaria 2013); the promotion of free trade agreements that increase economic inequality and poverty, which have left many under- and unemployed; the integration of drug, cash, gun, and human smuggling businesses as Mexico and Central America became major drug producers and transshipment points into the lucrative U.S. drug market (Vogt 2013); the construction of border walls that pushed migration traffic into desolate desert corridors controlled by organized crime and facilitated the extension of kidnapping and extortion as part of migration. This all works together to produce the multiple acts of violence that are carried out on men's, women's, and children's bodies, hearts, and minds, which we are asked to testify about.

As an expert witness, testimony becomes an object of expertise crafted by anthropologists. As noted by Carr, to be an expert is not just to be "authorized by an institutional domain of knowledge or to make determinations about what is true, valid or valuable" (2010:19). It is also "the ability to finesse reality and animate evidence through mastery of verbal performance" (Matoseian 1999:518). The anthropologist expert witness demonstrates mastery through both textual and verbal performance in preparing reports and in face-to-face or telephone testimony for an immigration judge. Providing expert testimony in written or oral form requires an interpretive framework that can link the story of an individual and their petition for asylum to a particular place, time, and set of circumstances that illuminates and buttresses the claims made by the petitioner.

If we add to this interpretive framework the charge of striving to represent the issues contained in one person's story in their historical, political, cultural, and economic complexity, then we begin to arrive at the approach I learned

from Martin Diskin. We studied and worked on individual asylum cases from El Salvador and Guatemala in the mid-1980s, but we also looked at the complex causes and the direct role of the U.S. government in causing refugees to flee from these countries. We analyzed the process by which the U.S. State Department certified that the governments of both countries were "making progress on human rights" and how judges used that justification to deny the vast majority of asylum applications.

As cultural experts, we must put an intersectional frame on the violence we explain, and testimony is an important tool of this analysis. For example, the structures of violence that young, often indigenous, and poor women and girls experience in Guatemala and on their journeys through Mexico to destinations in the United States occur in a transborder context that requires intersectional analysis. The concept of intersectionality, first widely used by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, explores how "race and gender shape multiple dimensions" of the life experiences of women of color (Crenshaw 1995:358).

The intersectional structural violence that Crenshaw documents in the U.S. against immigrant and other women of color—poverty, lack of employment options and skills, racial discrimination in housing and employment—is connected to related forms of transborder structural violence that link U.S. citizens and consumers to Central American refugee women and girls. Transborder violence can refer to transnational networks of violence that are spread across the boundaries of multiple nation states such as the human, drug, gun, and cash smuggling networks that stretch from Central America through Mexico and into the U.S., or to structures of violence that cross regional, class, ethnic, language, and racial boundaries. It also includes historical violence such as the genocide and deliberate gendered violence that was part of the Guatemalan civil war and that lives on in high levels of femicide and sexual assault in Guatemala. It continues for indigenous girls and women migrating from Guatemala and crossing Mexico in their quest to get to the U.S.

For example, from work on a dozen cases of primarily Mam women who have fled gendered violence in Huehuetenango and are pursuing gendered asylum in the U.S., conflicting and overlapping justice and security systems—as well as conflicting masculinities that play out inside and outside indigenous communities—are some of the primary sources of women's inability to access justice in their home territories. Initial fieldwork and in-depth interviews with Mam-gendered asylum seekers and other Mam refugees in the U.S. suggest a consistent set of practices, narratives, and actions carried out on women's bodies as a part of competing masculine practices of territorial control that continue the real and symbolic subordination of indigenous women to men in their local communities and beyond.

As a mentor, Martin Diskin taught me to first understand where my own politics, privilege, and citizenship were grounded, and what kind of responsibility

that gave me. He pushed me to delve into the historical record of U.S. intervention in Central America, and encouraged me to explore statistical trends in the granting of asylum, the role of lawyers, experts, and judges, and especially state department opinions. He observed that some of the most useful analysis could be found in the declarations and stories told by those petitioning for asylum. Indeed, the testimonies of recent Guatemalan indigenous women refugees are a case in point, and today I continue to use the many tools Martin guided me toward in working with testimony and studying its impact in the world.

## Conclusion

Processes of presenting, listening, codifying, and the dissemination of oral and other forms of testimony are fundamental to knowledge production and replication. The experience of testifying, and of witnessing others as they testify (directly and indirectly), is an important part of how political identities develop in individuals, how those individuals seek to provide others with the knowledge and confidence to analyze the world from their particular social locations, and of how groups of people participate in the ideological work of shifting public political discourses and perceptions and broadening social memory. The role of indigenous forms of oral and visual knowledge production and archiving are an important foundation for understanding the multiple ways that testimony does the work of producing unique epistemologies that decenter and complicate western systems of knowledge.

Certain literary forms such as the crónicas that make ample use of testimony—as we see in the work of Elena Poniatowska—bear an important kinship to the forms in which anthropologists incorporate testimony into ethnography and other textual forms such as expert witness reports. The act of witnessing, the form of first-person oral narrative, the affective power of the emotional connection created by testimony and the many forms in which it is captured and travels, make it one of the most powerfully expressive forms that anthropologists work with. Anthropologists have much to gain by revisiting the idea and practice of testimony and using it to enrich our analytical and methodological tool kit.

## Note

[1] http://faceofoaxaca.uoregon.edu/introduction/.

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