

Fenced-in Readings: *Testimonio* and Post-Conflict Narrative from Criticism to the U.S. Classroom

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Abstract

The problematic relationship between *testimonio* and its privileged readers is a matter that is frequently taken up in criticism of the genre and that echoes through a range of post-conflict fictional narratives written by Central American authors. In Horacio Castellanos Moya's novel *Insensatez* (2004) and Eduardo Halfon's short story "Lejano" (2008), marginalized voices are brought into institutional spaces where they create new tensions for privileged subjects. A critical reading of features of the two texts that intersect with multicultural learning goals as they are expressed in U.S. college mission statements suggests a series of implications for college-based readings of both *testimonio* and the post-conflict narratives that dialogue with it.

I wonder if taking on this study is a wrongheaded move. I do not go as far in that direction as the narrator of Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez* who in the novel's first sentence wonders if he is right in the head to take on the project that will occupy him throughout most of the text. I do not set off on this project doubting my own sanity (although perhaps I should), but I do wonder some about the wisdom of reading a couple of recent Central American texts as, simultaneously, a critic and a teacher. There is of course plenty of overlap in our critical and our pedagogical work. We do, however, tend to impose fairly rigid boundaries between critical writing on literature and writing on pedagogical practices. Whether or not such boundaries are justified, I have to pause before taking off down a forked path knowing that when I reach the fork I will continue straight up the middle rather than hanging a left or a right. If I am encouraged at all about the prospects of not getting too lost out there in between, it is because the two main texts that I consider in the study, the previously mentioned *Insensatez* along with Eduardo Halfon's short story "Lejano", practically invite such an approach when read together. Both in our work as critics of literature and as teachers of literature, it is essential that we be conscious of the ways we are using marginalized voices toward our professional aims. The respective narrators of Castellanos Moya's novel and Halfon's story, also in the context of their professional work, attempt to navigate gaping cultural differences while responding to marginalized voices. As a Latin Americanist working in a U.S. institution, I recognize in each narrator's dilemma certain features of choices that I face both as a critic and as a teacher of literature. Whether I am proposing a critical reading for professional colleagues or guiding students in interpretive exercises, there is always a risk that I am creating, to borrow Gayatri Spivak's term, a "domesticated other" (253) in order to avoid the much more unsettling task of facing an absolute other head on. Whether I underline the significance of a subaltern voice in a critical essay or in a classroom, by attempting to make the voice matter the way I think it should, I run the risk of, as John Beverley puts it, "resubalternizing" (4) the voice, making it stop mattering the way the speaker wanted it

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to matter. A second prong of the potential wrongheadedness to which I refer at the outset resides precisely there. In examining the question of professional uses we make of marginalized voices I am, of course, using marginalized voices toward professional aims. That is, as I have already suggested, a dilemma that is not too dissimilar from the binds in which the respective narrators of *Insensatez* and “Lejano” find themselves, institutional binds that have more than a few contact points with our own institutional quandaries in critical discourse and in teaching. Castellanos Moya’s narrator problematically committed to an editing task in a Catholic truth commission and Halfon’s narrator stuck in university teaching tasks whose value he questions give us numerous opportunities to lay bare some of our own binds and to examine critical and pedagogical challenges that U.S.-based academics face in our work with marginalized voices.

Perhaps especially for those of us who teach in undergraduate liberal arts institutions, there is an additional challenge. The vision statement at my own institution, like those of many other peer institutions, emphasizes academic work that prepares students for compassion and social action. The college where I work, according to our vision statement “aspires to graduate students with a life-long passion for learning, a compassion for others, and the ability to translate academic study and personal concern into effective leadership and action in their communities and the world” (Rhodes). In their official statements of mission or purpose, most other liberal arts institutions communicate similar goals in different terms. I cite three representative examples: “Trinity values learning, faith, service, and connection to others, honoring the dignity and worth of every person” (Trinity); “We place great emphasis on the learning that takes place in the creation of a functioning community: life in the residence halls, expression through the arts, [...] and direct engagement with human needs, nearby and far away” (Williams); “We integrate learning across the disciplines and put knowledge into practice, thus preparing students to be global citizens and informed leaders motivated by concern for the common good” (Elon). Often physically fenced off or otherwise symbolically detached from the communities that surround them, many liberal arts colleges have developed community-integrated learning initiatives designed to help students engage with nearby populations and issues. Integrating learning with international matters and promoting action in contexts that are a plane ride away from the gates are stated institutional goals that present a different set of challenges. A good number of our courses in advanced Spanish programs provide ample opportunities to explore issues of empathy with a distant other and possibilities for supporting justice with action. Contemporary Central American literature, with its frequent representation of U.S. roles and responsibilities in moments of intense human suffering, its various well-circulated and extensively debated *testimonios*, and its rich body of post-conflict literature, much of which dialogues with testimonial texts, provides more such opportunities than most other course topics. A Central American literature course in a U.S. liberal arts college can set in motion a rich intertext that emerges from the clash between the selection of texts and the ways our institutions state their missions.

There are, for example, a series of resonances between the empathy/compassion challenges faced by *Insensatez*’s narrator, the vision statements I quote above, and central questions posed by scholars of testimonial narrative. To this last point, as Kimberly Nance writes,

The question of *testimonio*’s potential efficacy is central to any engaged analysis. Can testimonial texts really be expected to contribute to the achievement of social goals? If it is possible to do such a thing with words, is it possible for *testimonio*’s speakers to influence the First World readers that constitute the genre’s largest audience? (66).

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If we can assume that in my work I am pursuing my institution's stated vision, I should be seeking to guide students toward translation of their "academic study [...] into effective leadership and action in their communities and the world". Given that context for the readings and discussion activities I coordinate in a Central America course, *Insensatez* and "Lejano" open avenues of inquiry into the roles that both literature and an academic institution might play in students' exploration of questions of empathy and options for social action. Nance asks if it is even possible for *testimonio* to achieve its project, "a concrete social action initiated by its speaking subjects, in which these subjects seek to enlist the cooperation of various others" (11). My goal is not so much to propose an answer to that question. Rather, I examine the dynamics set in motion in *Insensatez* and "Lejano" when marginalized voices are brought into institutional contexts and continue down the path opened by that comparative reading toward a series of questions that are worth examining when we work with marginalized voices in our own institutional contexts.

In *Insensatez*, Castellanos Moya, like his narrator and not entirely unlike the U.S. Latin Americanist or the U.S. student reading Latin American texts, sticks his nose into a foreign hornet's nest. Castellanos Moya creates in the novel a narrator who is clearly from El Salvador but who works in a church-sponsored truth commission in Guatemala, even though neither country is referred to by name in the text. While transnational and transcultural topics are in recent decades more the norm than the exception in Central American novels,¹ from the outset, Castellanos Moya's narrator is more than unnerved by his transnational writing task: "como si no me bastara con los enemigos en mi país, estaba a punto de meter mi hocico en este avispero ajeno" (16). The narrator's task is to enter the recent conflict history of a country that is not his own and, from a relatively safe and privileged position, to read and give meaningful shape to the testimonies of indigenous victims of atrocities. Castellanos Moya's task in fiction writing mirrors the narrator's task insofar as he reads testimonial voices and incorporates them in his fictional text, exactly as the narrator thinks of doing with the notebook full of copied fragments "que con suerte podría utilizar posteriormente en algún tipo de collage literario" (43). In that sense, Castellanos Moya through fiction and I through criticism enter into a reading/writing task that is not that different from the narrator's. A central challenge for all three reading/writing subjects is determining how best to engage with marginalized voices and with foreignness or otherness in the texts being read, fictionalized, edited, and/or critiqued.

Most of the published studies on *Insensatez* deal at least marginally with how the novel positions itself with respect to the genre of *testimonio*. Both logically and chronologically, the novel's publication and critical reception follow the period around the turn of the century during which enthusiasm for *testimonio* was in decline and, as Kimberly Nance puts it, "critics of all political stripes expressed a general suspicion of motives and a profound pessimism regarding the genre's social possibilities" (5). A few critics who have taken on *Insensatez* have tended to refer to and some of them to emphasize the narrator's empathetic response to the narratives he reads and edits. Nanci Buiza is among the critics who read *Insensatez* as, in part, "a fictionalization of [Castellanos Moya's] own perspective on this politically-charged genre [*testimonio*]" (152). Buiza in particular stresses the testimonial voices' successful communication of pain as the primary factor that gradually overcomes the narrator's initial cynicism. She reads the narrator as a figure who is "traumatized by the tragedy of the witnesses and survivors" (164) and who by "breaking through the frameworks that shaped his initial cynicism, [...] is able to identify and empathize with the indigenous other" (167). Buiza's essay brings into articulation many of the loose ends

¹ For discussion of the transnational trend in Central American literature, see Ortiz Wallner, especially pp27-30.

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the text leaves with respect to the narrator's affective response to the texts with which he is working. Indeed, even though my reading is often at odds with Buiza's treatment of empathy in the novel, I am indebted to her for more than a few matters that her essay elucidates. Similarly, although I propose here alternatives to several readings of empathy (Buiza, Kokotovic) and solidarity (Martínez Gutiérrez) that others have offered, my study builds on a series of dots those critics have already skillfully connected. In terms of the relationship that develops between the narrator and the testimonial voices he reads, my reading is most closely aligned with that of Grinsberg Pla, who states that "En ningún momento se provoca un espejismo de identificación empática entre el corrector de estilo y las víctimas testimoniantes" (np), and with that of Venkatesh, who states that "The incisive narrative voice [...] compels us to reevaluate the canonization or institutionalization of genocide, memory, and violence, as the report, like other official documentation, is after all a literary piece, and itself does not escape from the ethical questions surrounding *testimonio* as a genre" (220). I find readings like Grinsberg Pla's and Venkatesh's not only more convincing than the others but also more useful for reading the novel as a text that 1) participates in and expands the crisis of the *testimonio* and 2) explores notions of foreignness, otherness, subalternity, and hegemony by bringing together in fictional space anonymous indigenous voices and the figure of the outsider who approaches testimonial texts in an interpretive or editorial mode that does not lend itself readily to empathy or solidarity.

If the vision statement of my institution and similar statements that purport to guide the work of peer institutions truly describe what we are doing, academic study, especially in fields that emphasize multi-cultural readings, ought to inspire compassion for the other. More narrowly, study of a novel like *Insensatez* that develops a fictional treatment of testimonial voices might be viewed in part as an opportunity to shorten the distance between students and the victims of state-sponsored violence who are central to the novel's plot. What then does one do with those frequent moments of the novel that represent reading as an act that, instead of closing the empathy gap, widens it? In a critical approach that is in line with Grinsberg Pla's, Emanuela Jossa emphasizes the distance between the narrator of *Insensatez* and the testimonial voice, a distance that does not close even in the moments of the narrator's most emphatic reading reactions. In contrast with Buiza, who emphasizes the narrator's growing empathy for the testimonial victims whose voices he reads, Jossa stresses the text's sarcastic tone that escalates as the narrator's emotional responses to the testimonial texts intensify. Building her case in large part on these moments of sarcasm, Jossa argues that *Insensatez* develops "una muy consciente desautorización del escritor" (35). As Jossa and numerous other critics recognize, in the most intense moments of the narrator's response to the testimonial texts, something far more complex than empathy is occurring. In my reading, the "folly" to which the novel's title refers is the downward spiral of the narrator who, while editing testimonial voices, sees both art and commercial opportunity in a story of trauma that is not really his but that he narrates as if it were. Indeed, consciously or not, his strategy for narrating the trauma of indigenous subjects is to transform himself into a traumatized subject. While it is clear that the narrator's activities could conceivably put him in real danger, both of mental instability and of reprisal in the form of violence, it is equally clear that he speaks from a position of privilege that is relatively safe in comparison to the positions from which the testimonial victims and witnesses speak. This position from which the narrator speaks gives an ironic, often absurd tone to his sense of sharing the victims' traumatic experience, a tone that in the end undermines the possibility of reading the narrator's response as true empathy. The absurdity of these moments of shared trauma resonates with the experience of the privileged U.S. university student who, from a safe geographic and emotional

distance, reads the testimonial voices cited in *Insensatez*. Such a student might be right to ask whether it is equally absurd to suppose that a safe academic reading of printed words on paper could ever legitimately produce the sort of compassion our college vision statements imagine. One wonders, in fact, if the U.S. students best suited for empathetic readings of the marginalized voices cited in texts like *Insensatez* might be students of color whose fear of violence perpetrated by representatives of the state is entirely rational, decidedly non-absurd.

Even so, for those readers in perhaps greatest need of texts that challenge privileged positions, *Insensatez* has much to offer. While I might choose nearly any chapter of the novel for a close reading with such students in mind, Chapter 6 is where the issues most pertinent to the study come together most intensely. A U.S. student reading *Insensatez* has in her hands a work of fiction whose narrator repeatedly gets caught between *testimonio* and fiction or, more precisely, between his reading of testimonial voices and his desire to write fiction. At the heart of the chapter are the narrator's ruminations about a recently read fragment of the report in which a testimonial voice relates the death of a civil registry official who refused to turn over his town's death records. The narrator describes the passage as

un testimonio que me pareció el argumento de una novela en alguna parte leída y que esta mañana de domingo retornó a mi memoria con ganas de que yo me montara en él sin ponerle cortapisas a mi imaginación, que en realidad no había tal novela sino las ganas de hacerla, de trastornar la tragedia, de convertirme en el alma en pena del registrador civil (71-72).

He lies in bed imagining the plot of his future novel, “una trama de suspense y de aventuras que yo tendría que haber comenzado a hilvanar esa mañana de domingo [...] si yo hubiera sido entonces un novelista, claro está, y no el corrector de barbaridades que soñaba con ser quien no era” (74). He finally leaps out of bed and into the shower “firme en mi propósito de no hacerme una paja que dilapidara mi energía mental, de no divagar sobre un testimonio que jamás convertiría en novela, porque a nadie en su sano juicio le podría interesar ni escribir ni publicar ni leer otra novela más sobre indígenas asesinados” (74). In the passage, the narrator continues his tendency developed elsewhere in the novel to be tempted by the potentially lucrative fiction writing possibilities that the testimonial voices suggest to him. Here more than in other similar passages, he seems momentarily to recognize the frivolity and self-centeredness of such a temptation, associating his literary aspirations with masturbation. The moment of self-awareness comically falls apart when only a few lines later we find him “enjabonándome las ingles y los huevos, jalándome la verga” (75). The rest of the chapter, however, offers numerous opportunities to read the passage for far more than its humoristic thrust. Indeed, read alongside the other matters of self and other that come together in the chapter, the passage is a key moment in my reading of the narrative voice. The voice that questioned its own sanity in the first pages wondered if it was sane to work on the editing tasks but continued to work on them for most of the novel's duration. Here, the voice insists that it would be insane to write a novel on the worn out topic of human suffering and associates the uselessness of such a pursuit with masturbation. When we find him moments later unable to resist the urge to masturbate, the text seems to support reading the narrating voice as that of the subject who also writes the novel. Setting aside all the complexities that accompany such a reading of a text that clearly affiliates with the auto-fictional mode, the question is pertinent to the matter of empathy at the center of my study. If we read the narrating voice as also a writing voice, it is telling that he has not in the end written primarily about, as he puts it, “indígenas asesinados”, but rather about his own preoccupations

and fixations brought on by reading indigenous voices that describe the genocide committed against their own communities. He has written a novel, his own *testimonio* in a certain sense, that reveals his inability to read testimonial voices and be moved to empathy for victims and to social actions on their behalf.

Whether the narrator is conscious or not of his incapacity for empathy is an additional question that complicates my reading of the narrator as a writing subject. Weiser, responding to Kokotovic's question about how a novel might communicate genocidal horror without leaving readers "overwhelmed, desensitized, and indifferent" (Kokotovic 545) proposes that "[t]he answer, it would seem, is to dramatize that very desensitization, the senselessness that provides the title of the novel" (Weiser np). My reading, while very much compatible with this feature of Weiser's, underlines the curious autofictional game that Castellanos Moya plays. He writes a novel but inscribes in it an alternative "yo", a writing subject desensitized to the suffering humans whose voices he reads daily. Through the process of autofictional mirroring, the narrator becomes a vehicle for Castellanos Moya's own reflection on the perils of authoring a work of fiction that depends so heavily on anonymous voices of victims. In my reading, the literal mirror in the novel's closing chapter has implications for Castellanos Moya himself, and indeed for any writer or reader who enters into a literary relationship with voices that are speaking in order to promote social action. In the closing pages, the narrator now in Switzerland sits at a bar facing a mirror and suddenly sees through the mirror that, Óscar Pérez Mena, the general suspected of coordinating many of the massacres referred to in the testimonial text, is seated near him. Pérez Mena, himself a fictional mirror for the historical Otto Pérez Molina, appears in the midst of multiple drunken repetitions on the part of the narrator of another fragment from the testimonial text, "*Todos sabemos quiénes son los asesinos!*" (153-155). The phrase, through the mirror in the bar, joins the narrator with Pérez Mena/Pérez Molina and, through the mirroring effect of autofiction, implicates even Castellanos Moya himself and, by extension, the reader in the overall complex of responsibility for suffering. The dynamic of the bar mirror finishes off the novel's use of the autofictional mirror by suggesting that although Pérez Mena/Pérez Molina might be directly responsible for the genocide, literary uses of the victims that take writers and readers away from consideration of human suffering in favor of academic or aesthetic concerns constitute a second form of violence committed against the victims.² Pérez Mena/Pérez Molina killed, raped, and maimed victims; we, along with Castellanos Moya and his reading/writing narrator always run the risk of making victims disappear, even when we are reading and writing about them.

Attention diverted to superficial forms or to extraneous matters is, in fact, the notion developed to absurd extremes in Chapter 6. There, the narrator hears a shooting and obsessively counts and argues the number of shots while ignoring the causes, the mechanisms, the perpetrators, and the victims of the act of violence: "como si yo fuera un policía que hubiera acudido a investigar los hechos, cuando lo que a mí me interesaba saber era cuántos disparos había escuchado él, cinco como decía yo que estaba atento, o seis como el portero que en su estampida perdió la atención" (76). Similarly, he lusts for his Spanish colleagues while expressing disgust for indigenous women, thinking of "la carnosa guarida de Fátima" as a refuge from the "súbito e inesperado recuerdo de las centenas de indígenas entre las cuales había deambulado un par de horas atrás en el Parque Central" and fixing his attention on the "diseño de los tejidos y

² See Creegan Miller pp102-104 for a Lacanian reading of the bar mirror that, in more depth than space permits here, explores the relationship between the narrator's reading of testimonial voices and the fragmentation of his sense of self.

al corte de esos trajes étnicos cuyos faldones coloridos impedían el mínimo asomo de la carne” instead of on the “ojos rasgados y piel tostada” of the indigenous women who fail to excite him sexually (79). Both passages echo earlier moments in which the narrator attends to the sounds and the poetic qualities of the testimonial fragments rather than to the suffering to which the voices refer. Chapter 6 persistently asks questions that are difficult but necessary in our classrooms. Do we take care when reading and responding to literature not to domesticate the other who is there represented by studying the injustice she suffered on the same plane as the sounds and formal narrative features of the text? Worse, do we make the victims of injustice secondary to such formal features of the text and thus commit a second violence against them by making them disappear? Can we talk about the formal features of such a text without doing the equivalent of fixating on whether there were 5 or 6 shots instead of asking who was hurt, who did the hurting, and what roles we might play in justice efforts?

Eduardo Halfon’s short story “Lejano” offers some ground on which to work at the questions from other angles. From within a Guatemalan setting, Halfon takes on the fenced-in nature of university-based readings and ways of knowing in the story. A narrative that, like *Insensatez*, develops in the mode of autofiction, the story opens with its narrator, named Halfon, teaching a Ricardo Piglia essay to university students who are described as disinterested, distracted, and “medio dormidos”. The opening scene leads the narrator to question from the outset the value of literature and literature teaching: “como todos los años, me pregunté si esa mierda en verdad valía la pena” (11). He briefly adopts the student perspective and imagines that each one must be thinking, “me las puedo solo, sin libros y sin pendejos que todavía creen que la literatura es una cosa importante” (12). Just as the narrator is ready to align his own disillusion with that of the students, the only indigenous student in the class makes a poetic observation that restores the narrator’s interest in the discussion. The story is for me personally unsettling not least of all for the reality that the university in which it is set, Universidad Francisco Marroquín, is without a doubt the nearest Guatemalan equivalent to the U.S. private liberal arts college in which, as Halfon writes with regard to UFM, “la gran mayoría del alumnado [...] proviene de familias adineradas” (14). The indigenous student, Juan Kalel, attends the university on a special scholarship, echoing one strategy that U.S. private liberal arts institutions have employed in their efforts to diversify student bodies across economic status and race categories. The narrator imagines, then, that Kalel represents what for most of the students and their families would be an outsider within the university’s fences. For the narrator himself, Kalel begins to represent the possibility of exposing “no solo la falsedad e hipocresía de los demás alumnos sino, a veces, luctuosamente, la del mismo profesor y su viciado sistema académico” (14). The exposure becomes more profound and personal for the narrator when he travels to the western highlands in search of Kalel after the student mysteriously withdraws from the university. Most relevant to this study is that the narrator’s voyage outside the fences of a Guatemalan university to the Guatemalan highlands is essentially the voyage that Kalel had made in reverse. The language and cultural challenges that the narrator has to navigate, for the most part unsuccessfully, are the inverse of those that Kalel had navigated, at least from the narrator’s perspective, successfully.

With respect to my discussion of *Insensatez*, it is important to underline that in “Lejano” what first draws the narrator’s attention to Kalel is a poetic observation the student makes on a literary text that is provoking nothing but disinterest in the traditional student population and that was beginning to leave the narrator himself disaffected. While *Insensatez*’s narrator distances himself from the indigenous speakers and fixates on the forms of the language spoken, language from an indigenous voice is what first prompts Halfon’s narrator to seek a closer link to and a more

profound understanding of the individual. Kalel's unique cultural perspective and poetic language initially draw the narrator's attention and prompt out-of-class discussions on literary topics which eventually lead Kalel to share his written poetry with the narrator. The language uses that are an essential feature of the beginning of the relationship between the narrator and the student are the front bookend to the counterpart language issues that surface when the narrator travels to the highlands in search of Kalel. On his drive, the sonorous quality of place names already has the narrator under a spell with more than a few similarities to the language enchantment that affects the narrator of *Insensatez*: "Los nombres de los pueblos guatemaltecos jamás dejan de asombrarme. Son todos como suaves cascadas o como gemidos eróticos de algún bello felino o como bromas peripatéticas, depende. [...] Todos estos nombres poseen algún hechizo lingüístico, pensé mientras manejaba y los iba entonando como pequeñas plegarias" (29). From the enchantment of place names, the narrator proceeds, as he arrives in Kalel's town, through moments that take him more profoundly into language barriers. He describes the young girl who waits on him at a restaurant as having "un acento fuerte, como si le costara un gran esfuerzo pronunciar cada palabra" (30). He soon meets the girl's aunt who has "un acento aún más fuerte que el de su sobrina" and who takes him further into the intercultural, inter-language divide (31). Before he even leaves the restaurant, he has taken another step in the same direction when he asks a man about the Cakchiquel word for a part of his garment: "me respondió que xerka. ¿Perdón? Xerka, repitió casi sin abrir la boca. ¿Con equis?, le pregunté y él solo levantó los hombros y dijo que eso ya no lo sabía" (32).

From his discussions of written literary texts in the classroom on the first pages of the story, the narrator has thus reached what for him is a surprising reminder of the oral-centered language use in some communities of his own country. It is fitting then that before he locates Kalel, Halfon tries to communicate with a monolingual Cakchiquel speaker and the intercultural, inter-language divide becomes complete:

Una muchacha estaba sentada detrás de una reja, como encarcelada, y al verme se levantó. Muy buenas, le dije. Ella únicamente sonrió nerviosa. [...] ¿Conoce usted a Juan Kalel? Y ella, cruzando los brazos, murmuró algo ininteligible. [...] Me mantuve en silencio unos segundos. Pensé en todos esos barrotes que nos separaban, en tantos barrotes, y me sentí inútil (32).

A story that opens with its narrator doubting the usefulness of literature thus heads toward its closing moments with the narrator facing the limitations of Spanish and doubting his own capacity to navigate, to interpret, to mediate, to act as a guide—in short, to do all those things that a student expects a professor to do. As essential as multi-cultural reading is and as eye-opening as *testimonio* reading can be for the privileged reader, "Lejano" opens multiple opportunities for honest discussion in the U.S. liberal arts context of our limitations, students' and professors' alike, when it comes to reading as a vehicle for developing empathy and compassion for the other. As Doris Sommer has expressed it, "The asymmetry of positions restricts a reader's travel from one place to the other, despite the fantasies of mutuality that imagine efforts to understand an ethnically inflected text compensate for a writer's burden to perform in an imperial language" (9). Kalel has learned to perform in imperial languages. That is, he has navigated Spanish and the codes of the university successfully enough to insert his voice in academic discourse and to significantly alter the narrator's thoughts on aesthetics and on the value of literature. The narrator's travel outside the university into a space where he fails to perform in the colonized language forms an essential part of a new phase of his professional self-doubt.

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On these matters and especially with respect to notions of literature, “Lejano” offers sharp contrasts with *Insensatez*. Castellanos Moya’s novel explores a character whose task is to shepherd indigenous voices in their trek into and through institutional spaces toward textual forms. In the process of carrying out those tasks, the narrator considers the possibility of making literature from the raw material of the indigenous voices. Halfon’s story also opens in an institutional space, a classroom in an elite Guatemalan university, with a professor guiding students through an essay by a canonical Latin American writer, Ricardo Piglia, as a way of opening discussion on the other canonical writers that will be studied in the course’s syllabus, Edgar Allan Poe, Flannery O’Connor, Guy de Maupassant, and others. As I have alluded to already, the story reaches in its first couple of pages the narrator’s incipient disillusion with literature as a mode of meaning-making that is relevant for students. Kalel, the one particularly poetic, insightful student who begins to restore the narrator’s enthusiasm for the possibilities of university-based literary study, withdraws from the university and disappears from sight. As the one particularly poetic, insightful student in the course who begins to restore the narrator’s enthusiasm for the possibilities of university-based literary study, Kalel just as quickly withdraws from the university and disappears from sight. The inverse relationship with *Insensatez* accelerates at this moment of “Lejano” as the narrator temporarily distances himself from the institutional space of the university, from literature, and indeed from Spanish and, by extension, the other Europe-based languages and cultures that form the content of his course. As I have traced above, he moves over the course of the story through a series of steps from a Spanish-language, text-based space to a non-Spanish-language, oral-based space. The narrator’s trip to Kalel’s town seems to have a dual motivation. On the one hand, he fears that Kalel, in leaving him his notebooks, has given up on poetry. The narrator thus travels in part in an effort to reinstate the value and meaningfulness of poetry for Kalel: “Quería decirle que por favor siguiera escribiendo poemas” (36). On the other hand, the narrator’s trip seems motivated by regret for what Kalel’s sudden absence means for his own faith in the value of literary study: “Quería decirle que me hacía mucha falta su presencia en clase” (36). Once the narrator is resigned to losing Kalel from the university, the story makes its final turns in a territory that is worth comparing with the starting point of *Insensatez*. While the narrator of *Insensatez*, from an institutional project and setting is drawn away from the institutional mission toward what he perceives as the poetic qualities of the voices of indigenous victims, the narrator of “Lejano” physically distances himself from the institutional space of the university before concluding that Kalel’s version of poetry does not depend on the forms and the aesthetic notions studied from within the institution: “Alguien como Juan Kalel, aunque quisiese, jamás dejaría la poesía, principalmente porque la poesía jamás lo dejaría a él. No era una cuestión de forma, ni de estética, sino de algo mucho más absoluto, mucho más perfecto que poco o nada tenía que ver con la perfección” (36). To further put my reading of “Lejano” in terms that resonate with *Insensatez*, Halfon’s narrator concludes that Kalel’s poetic voice does not require his form of institutionalized editing. Both narrators abandon their institutional form-giving projects—Castellanos Moya’s because the poetic force of the indigenous voices and his identification with them drive him to panic and to fear for his safety; Halfon’s because he understands that the poetic force of the indigenous voice does not depend on his institutional tools.

“Lejano” and *Insensatez* thus start where many *testimonios* start and stay, with a privileged, institutionally connected scribe-editor-mentor chaperoning a subaltern subject’s voice. From there “Lejano” early on becomes an exploration of the subaltern voice’s capacity for renewing tired institutional (academic) discourse. Then when economic realities take Kalel out of the in-

stitutional space and the narrator follows his steps back to a space where orality and non-European language are predominant, Kalel's voice gives the narrator a new, expanded notion of poetry that is free from an institutionally prescribed aesthetic. Although some readers might be left wishing for a more forceful indictment of the economic inequalities that affect access to higher education—the text treats the actual circumstances of the family's economic bind only briefly (35)—the story does convey with quite a punch a critique of the notion that the subaltern voice needs the tutelage of a privileged mentor. Art, the narrator concludes, and specifically poetry was in Kalel before the narrator's institutional intervention. *Insensatez* takes a much more circuitous route to the suggestion that the artistic relevance of the indigenous voice does not rely on consecrated institutions or on the patronage of a privileged intellectual. The stated aim of the institution in which the narrator works is, after all, not art but rather the documentation of truth toward social justice goals. The narrator takes the indigenous voices that demand justice and transforms them into poetry when he associates their sonorous qualities and their syntax with canonical poets, namely César Vallejo. As if for him social justice and poetic quality constitute an either/or proposition, the narrator leaves the social justice thrust of the indigenous voices in the institutional space that he abandons, taking with him into exile the poetic enchantments that incited his panic. The end of the novel thus prompts a reminder that the character the narrator refers to as “Monseñor”, while an overt double for the historical Bishop Juan Gerardi, is also a sort of inverted mirror image of the narrator. The narrator works from Monseñor's office and in that respect physically stands in for him. But unlike the narrator, Monseñor attends directly to human suffering and joins in solidarity the social justice aim of the indigenous voices. Monseñor's assassination at the end of the novel thus further links him to injustices committed against the indigenous community in the sense that he joins the victims in victimhood. The narrator attends to sounds, poetic qualities, designs on fabrics, clothing, sexual attractiveness or not, the number of shots fired rather than the problem of violence. He survives in Europe far from the violence but also emotionally and intellectually as well as geographically detached from the victims. Rather than joining the victims like his textual double (Monseñor), he joins us, his extratextual doubles, the academic readers who attend to aesthetic details of a text as we go about a safe literary activity. In the mid-1990s, Mary Louise Pratt reflected on the challenges of reading Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* with privileged U.S. students. She wrote,

The strategic insistence on concreteness and specificity culminates for readers in the dramatic accounts of the torture and deaths of her brother and mother. In teaching those overwhelming chapters, it is important, in my view, to underscore the intentionality with which they are constructed to break through the disengagement and indifference of an audience far from the situation. (67)

A decade later, Castellanos Moya explores in *Insensatez* the notion that not only is reader engagement not enough, but that the wrong sort of reader engagement with testimonial voices is likely counterproductive with respect to the social justice goals that the voices promote.

“Lejano” briefly risks taking its narrator down a similar path. Just as with the place names that enchanted his ear on the way to Kalel's town, a conversation in Cakchikel draws the narrator's attention to sounds independent from meaning: “Una amiga de Juan llegó a saludarlo y se pusieron a platicar en cakchikel. Sonaba bellissimo, como a gotitas de lluvia cayendo en una laguna, o algo así” (36). This is not, however, the same territory *Insensatez*'s narrator traverses when he fixates on the poetic qualities of phrases and completely disregards the message of trauma the phrases urgently seek to communicate. The conversation in Cakchikel takes Halfon's narra-

tor in quite a different direction as it is the prompt for a conversation about how Kalel decides whether to write in Spanish or in Cakchikel and from there to the following exchange: “¿Sabe, Halfon, cómo se dice poesía en cakchikel?, me preguntó de repente. Le dije que no, que ni idea. Pachún tzij, dijo él. [...] Es un neologismo que significa trenzado de palabras, dijo. [...] Es algo así, dijo, como un huipil de palabras, como un tejido de palabras, y no dijo más” (37).

Where *Insensatez*'s narrator obsessed about the poetic qualities of phrases and then forced them into his own received concept of poetry by comparing them with verses written by César Vallejo, for the narrator of “Lejano” the enchanting poetic sounds of the indigenous voice are the opportunity to embark on a conversation that ends with Kalel's brief explanation of what one might read as a basic feature of his community's poetry aesthetics. Just as *testimonio* prompted a debate on (and for some a reconfiguration of) the terms with which we thought of literature, Kalel's notion of poetry forces the narrator to reconfigure his notion of poetry.

There are numerous implications of this reading for multi-cultural study in U.S. liberal arts institutions. “Empathy”, “compassion”, “kinship” and many of the other keywords we employ in our mission statements are read, as they should be, as charges to select readings and design course activities that help students feel closer than before to distant individuals and communities. The readings I have developed here suggest that closing cultural and language gaps is not enough and that not all forms of association with the other contribute to justice. The parameters that Doris Sommer lays out in *Proceed with Caution* are good points of reference for bringing my critical reading back around to these pedagogical questions. Sommer argues that for the testimonial reader, Rigoberta Menchú offers “a metonymic association in place of a metaphoric overlap.” For Sommer, metonymy “is a figure for coalitions, imaginative enough to see commonality yet modest enough to respect differences” and empathy “is the egocentric energy that drives one subject to impersonate another” (22). Sommer's critique of empathy is precisely the territory of *Insensatez*. In addition to the examples I have developed above, I might finally return to look more closely at the low point in the narrator's wrongheaded associations with the victims whose testimonies he reads. After reading the testimony of a victim who was brutally raped by her captors and who was forced to watch as a male prisoner's genitals were severed, the narrator's response is to worry about his own symptoms of venereal disease and to seek a cure. The chapter that opens with the narration of this horrific form of violence and with the narrator's encounter with the victim, Teresa, closes with his mad urgency to find a cure for the venereal disease: “lo inmediato era detener la infección, por lo que [...] me dirigí hacia el enorme portón de madera, crucé la calle apestosa a mendigos y vendedores informales, y entré a la farmacia de la esquina en busca de un boticario que me recetara la penicilina más potente contra el mal que me aquejaba” (117). We might say that the narrator's reading experience with the testimonial text is empathetic only if by empathetic we mean a reduction of the abject victimization of the other to terms compatible with the relatively minor inconveniences of the privileged reader. He avoids face-to-face contact with the testimonial subject—“no hacía ni cinco minutos que revisaba el texto en el que Teresa narraba las más abominables violaciones a que había sido sometida por los militares que la torturaban y lo que menos me apetecía era enfrentarme con su rostro” (108)—in favor of a metaphoric association between the severed genitals of the male victim in the *testimonio* and his own venereal disease. As such, he experiences via reading a rather intense association with a victim, but it is a metaphorical association that prompts him to seek a cure for himself instead of for the injustice suffered by the testimonial victim.

While the narrator of *Insensatez* accommodates starkly different indigenous victims' experiences to his own, the narrator of “Lejano” first experiences a strong identification with Kalel

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around poetry and short stories and then finds himself drawn into an experience of intense difference. His desire to understand Kalel's withdrawal from the university puts him at a juncture from which he might employ a strategy like that of the narrator of *Insensatez* and accommodate Kalel's experience to his own familiar terms taken from frameworks such as the university, Spanish language, poetry, and short fiction. Instead, as first Kalel and then the narrator leave the institutional space of the university for their encounter on Kalel's home turf, one by one the narrator's standard frameworks fail him in his effort to connect. By that time, economic hardships faced by Kalel's family have already prompted the breakdown of the sort of intercultural communication that was starting to emerge in the narrator's classroom and have underlined the failure of systemic efforts to make the university a more inclusive institution. Once in Kalel's community the narrator finds that Spanish often fails as a vehicle for exchanging even basic information, much less for forming intimate understandings across cultural barriers. Where the story's intertext with *Insensatez* truly intensifies is in its treatment of poetry and the short story as aesthetic forms that get bound up in the narrator's efforts to connect with Kalel. While the narrator of *Insensatez* accommodates the testimonial voices to his terms valuing them for their similarities to César Vallejo's poetic style and thinking about how some of them might be starters for a novel, the narrator of "Lejano" eventually abandons his own terms, letting Kalel's description of his community's concept of poetry close the story's treatment of the topic. Furthermore, the story that opened with a university classroom discussion of short fiction as a form in which "[u]n relato visible esconde un relato secreto" (11) ends with the narrator's act of respect for Kalel's secrets. At the story's end, the narrator and Kalel speak with an old man who in the town square tells fortunes by asking a trained canary to select slips of paper from a wheel. After the narrator has paid the man to tell Kalel's fortune, Kalel puts the slip of paper in his pocket keeping his fortune a secret from both the narrator and the reader. The story's ending thus has a striking resonance with the end of Rigoberta Menchu's *testimonio*: "Sigo ocultando lo que yo considero que nadie sabe, ni siquiera un antropólogo, ni un intelectual, por más que tenga muchos libros, no saben distinguir todos nuestros secretos" (271). One could in fact read the end of "Lejano" as in part the response of a bookish intellectual to Menchu's act of secretive defiance directed at the outsider who hopes to understand her communities: "Juan empezó a sonreír. Pensé en preguntarle qué decía el papelito, pensé en preguntarle qué futuro le había vaticinado el canario amarillo, pero preferí no hacerlo. Hay sonrisas que no deben ser entendidas" (Halfon 38). The thrust of the story's ending is thus not so much Kalel's reticence, but rather the narrator's closure of his own visible story precisely on the open-endedness of Kalel's invisible story. As such, the ending contrasts sharply with the short-story theory the narrator was expounding at the beginning. There he had explained that for Piglia, "[e]l cuento se construye para hacer aparecer artificialmente algo que estaba oculto" (11). "Lejano", however, ends not with an act of revelation but rather with an act of hiding and with the narrator more or less resigned to the failure of his standard tools of meaning making.

Both *Insensatez* and "Lejano" are very much about precisely the act that we are engaged in when we read testimonial texts in a U.S. college course, the effort to form connections with an other whose life experience develops on the opposite side of cultural and language barriers from our own. Read together, *Insensatez* and "Lejano" raise a series of unsettling questions for the U.S. reader of *testimonio*. If empathy and compassion are among the reading goals I pursue, what are the forms of identification or association with the other that might reduce rather than increase my readiness to empathize and to respond compassionately in favor of justice? If I am shaken by a testimonial text, what are the risks of metaphorical associations I might make between

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injustices denounced in the text and my own experiences? If I “work” with a testimonial text, which of my critical tools are allowing me to listen to the testimonial voice and which of them potentially interfere with the particular, intentional act of justice-seeking that the testimonial subject has initiated by speaking? Are there alternative tools that the testimonial voice offers me as reader that might be more useful than the ones I have used previously to make sense of other types of texts? If there are potential understandings that the testimonial subject withholds from me, is it possible that the overall goal of justice might be served by my partial ignorance? Extending from there, in academic activities that I have normally associated with truth-seeking, what might be the value of embracing the reality that there are cross-cultural truths that will always remain at least partially hidden from my view? In other words, how might I continue to get better at reading the smile that should not be understood?

As Venkotesh has argued, the narrative voice of *Insensatez* “compels us to reevaluate the canonization or institutionalization of genocide, memory, and violence” (220). Reading *Insensatez* and “Lejano” together suggests a targeted critical approach to, more narrowly, the stated missions of the academic institutions in which we work. To be sure, empathy and compassion cannot in general be bad responses to cultivate. But for certain communication acts that a marginalized voice sets in motion and directs toward privileged audiences, Doris Sommer’s caveat is particularly pertinent:

Precisely because citizens cannot presume to feel or to think, or to perform alike, their ear for otherness makes justice possible. That is why political philosophy and ethics, from Benjamin and Arendt to Bakhtin and Levinas, caution against empathy, which plays treacherously in a subject-centered key that overwhelms unfamiliar voices only to repeat the solitary sounds of the self. (3)

Sommer goes on from there to argue that in texts produced by marginalized voices, “signs of refusal to fit into a reader’s agenda are transmitted, and we should stop to notice” (4) I would add that “signs of refusal to fit” into an institution’s agenda are also transmitted and that “we should stop to notice” them as well. Our mission statements inscribe reading agendas which some texts, and perhaps most testimonial texts, defy. To take my own institution’s vision statement as a handy example, compassion headed toward leadership might not be what some voices we read are asking us for. Leadership based on a presumption of knowledge of the other or, worse, on an intense sense of identification with the other risks echoing the “solitary sounds of the self” against which Sommer warns and in which the narrator of *Insensatez* immerses himself to the exclusion of all other sounds. The marginalized voices we read might instead be asking us to listen without overwhelming them. They might be asking us to join in on work they are already leading even if there’s nothing in our experience that we might relate to theirs. And to take one last cue from “Lejano”, the marginalized voices that were, after all, underrepresented or entirely absent from the formation of the institutions within which we read might be challenging us to read them on their own terrains. That is, they might be making the reasonable request that we form our response only after achieving some critical distance from our institutions, the reading agendas that govern them, and the aesthetic notions that circulate in them.

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