

EDITORIAL:

Testimonial Writing and *la facultad*

by

Sophia Emmanouilidou



Untitled by Christina Panoutsou-Fontolan, 2013.

The current issue of *Echoes* online literary magazine extends an earnest, but also tentative, (re)consideration of some of the polarities we confront in life. But, the ensuing creative submissions consolidate antinomies and binary oppositions. In fact, they craft a discursive context between the conversational and the literary, the mundane and the inspiring, the idiosyncratic and the collective, the philosophical and the practical, the elaborate and the unrefined. The contributors to *Echoes* issue are/were graduate students in the MA in English and

American Studies at the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece, for the academic years 2019-2021. Specifically, they were (and still are) ardent readers of literature but, mostly, novices in the fascinating world of Chicana/o Studies. One of the courses the students attended was “Ethnic Studies,” a course that propelled them to probe numerous writings, theoretical and literary, drawn from the politicized, liminal and existential bulk produced by Chicana/o thinkers over a span of 60 years. At the end of the semester, students were invited to reflect on the lectures, literary writings and theoretical perspectives they touched upon, and encouraged to do so in the form of creative writing, in prose or verse, as a token resistance to the disciplined, daunting requirements of essay writing that would follow before the end of the semester. Students were asked to respond to the following questions, inter alia: How do Chicana/o writings reflect your experiences or vice versa? How do conceptualizations of ethnicity and racial phenotype intersect with a white European’s experience? What are some of the exigencies Chicana/o writings put forward that have resonated with you? Which theory struck a chord of enthusiasm, sympathy, sorrow, joy, etc.?

The idea for the current issue on testimonial writing and *la facultad* dawned at a time when we all had to make the transition from our convivial, in-person gatherings in the physical setting of a cozy classroom to faceless and often erratic lectures/sessions behind the screen. In retrospect, it seems as if we were abruptly shoved into a ‘new’ online reality, a digitized context, which efficiently allowed us to continue our academic activities and delve into textual analyses, but also forced us to reassess being-in-the world. In their testimonies, students submitted their uninhibited, unwavering interactions and negotiations with the course material, while at the same time contextualized their thought-processes in the new reality they had entered, a reality marked by social distancing, masking, home-isolation, institutionalized surveillance, infectious bodies, and so on. Although Covid-19 related crises (collective and personal, regional and international) were not meant to be the pulsating themes of the submissions, those crises did stir highly emotive reactions to course requirements, sparked reminiscence and facilitated self-realization, and all of the above is reflected in the literary detours I received.

But what exactly is a *testimonio*? How does testimonial writing put forward a statement about life? A *testimonio* is a heterogenous type of writing, one that combines the personal with the theoretical, the inner/psychic lens with the ostensibly pragmatic. Authentic in its core, the

testimonio is narrative that challenges master-discourses and questions standards of taste. In particular, testimonial writing fuses generic categories and, in the words of George Yúdice, it is “a personal story ... a shared one with the community to which the testimonialista belongs. The speaker does not speak for or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation which is simultaneously personal and collective” (15). In short, this type of writing overcomes limitations of narrative classification and “blur[s] the boundaries between social science, political activism and literature” in a cross-pollination of different modes of writing (19).

Testimonios address unresolved situations of the past, present queries, while also envisaging an altered future through storytelling. A testimony is a commanding tool in reaching out or handing down to the world the version of a tale that one deems worth recording. More than just a personal narrative, the usual type that offers detailed accounts of personal observations, testimonial writing seeks connections with the broader world and the writer’s more immediate setting. An act of bravery, in fact, a testimony advances the kaleidoscopic view of life when prompting an ‘asymmetrical’ version of reality, a reality that is often carefully devised and strategically propagated for us all. What this brings to mind is Anais Nin’s often-quoted phrase: “We don’t see things as they are; we see them as we are” (124). Indeed, a *testimonio* involves sharing what one experiences in real-time, regardless of the fact that these experiences may be readily palpable or resurface from the crevices of our memory, our subconscious minds. Ultimately, to realize the significance of a testimony means to acknowledge the fact that the writer makes a compromise between individual contemplation and the public gaze.

Testimonial writing marks a shift at the heart of what we generally consider to be literary or sophisticated. When, for instance, oral history or the unmediated voice of the marginalized intersects with the literary, then the *testimonio* most markedly reflects agency. One of the texts that resounded in our classes was Gloria E. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), a seminal quest into borderland terrains and the crossings one performs when restricted by geographical, cultural and social barriers. In her uncompromising signature style, Anzaldúa brings together different genres, interlaces theory with autobiography, and concludes with a poetry section, in which the literary narration of personal experience illustrates the socio-cultural crises discussed in the longer first section of the book. In the chapter “Entering into the

Serpent,” Anzaldúa introduces readers to her ability to oscillate between the immediately perceptible dimension of being-in-the-world and her esoteric thinking in deference, or the delayed attempts at assigning meaning to life. Anzaldúa names this skill *la facultad* and elaborates on the notion by adding that a thinker, aspiring or established, should explore the arduous aptitude to become familiar with one’s innermost self and simultaneously defamiliarize conventional modes of perception. And then she adds that *la facultad* is a “survival tactic,” the kind a thinker devises when the world around seems to erase difference, justify oppression and silence distress (39).

Without implying that our “Ethnic Studies” classes in the MA programme recreated the conditions of surveillance and control of the Panoptikon type that students needed to survive from/within, the reflective writings in the issue showcase the contributors’ explorations of their distinct *la facultad*.¹ Foregrounding the eagerness to overcome barriers of thinking and writing, the contributors perform border crossings as they depart from standard modes of academic writing, which presuppose the detached, impersonal process of researched writing. In fact, the creative submissions that comprise this *Echoes* issue bridge the divide between academic formality and emotional attachment. All writings in this issue attempt a shift in hermeneutics by coalescing use of primary and secondary sources, verse lines and/or prose. And in a way they unfold reflections on the course material by interlacing the personal vector. “How can the course material become a real-life experience?” being the impromptu question voiced in an online class, with fascinating narratives and beneath the “everyday mode of consciousness,” contributors explore the potential of Anzaldúa’s *la facultad* (39). If anything, *la facultad* “breaks into one’s everyday mode of perception, ... causes a break in one’s defenses and resistance, ... takes one from one’s habitual grounding, causes the depth to open up, causes a shift in perception” (39).

Anastasia Miskaki zooms on the seam lines of different life stories in a familial tale, one that infuses theory into testimonial writing. The poem “If History could set me Free” builds up on the aptitude of a young thinker’s *la facultad* by inviting a transhistorical exploration of women’s experience in the context of liminality. The poem seeks the experiential connections of female

¹ My use of the Panoptikon metaphor is in accordance with Michel Foucault’s discussion of disciplinary institutions in societies that subjugate citizens and coerce free will. See: *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

representation in time and space. Before long, these connections become daring border crossings as they bridge the gap between the historical and the fictive, the private and the shared, the old and the new, in the persona's climactic resolution "to believe," "to change."

In "Our painful world," Effrosyni Pappa tackles a student's "initial hesitance" to probe Chicana/o Studies. Despite the raw sense of incompatibility Pappa originally detects between one's research interests and course material, the speaking voice revisits notions that circulated class discussions to make reading a real life-experience and reconcile the past with the present. "Transference" of pain, migration, silencing, invisibility and loss becomes the theme of her *testimonio*, in a most powerful "inter-reference," or meaning-exchange between the personal, the regional and the universal dimensions of experience.

Eirini Nathanailidou has been prompted by the diverse and, yet, in a paradoxical way, convergent female voices she probed during the semester. The polyphonic thought-processes launched by the Latina thinkers and that Nathanailidou cites have allowed her to unreel what she calls a "multicultural and multivocal text that would engage with the complexity of hybrid identities." "Pilgrims of Babylon" is a compelling code-switching in which English, Spanish, Russian, Bulgarian, the Pontiac Greek dialect and even fluid/adapted linguistic codes, mostly by-products of cultural 'world-travelling,' come in order to flesh out the multifarious version of the persona. Apart from the stylistic device of linguistic diversity that cannot or, more to the point, should not be disciplined, Nathanailidou's *testimonio* in verse is a profound negotiation of the past and the present with a view to underscoring the possibility/ies of self-actualization in the future.

Vasileia Moschou undertakes writing her *testimonio* while standing at a forking path. In "Travelling," the speaking voice deciphers life from a crossroads, one that is constituted in the figurative antinomies between the East and the West, the North and the South, the new and the old, girl or woman, 'ma' or 'pa,' until she reaches the 'sour sweet' taste of being-in-the-world. Moschou's reflection expands on, yet only to weaken, the binaries she confronts with a brief reference to the poet's craft. In a meta-poetic style, she wonders what might be the launching site for a poet's work: aesthetics or politics? Like *deus ex machina*, Tino Villanueva responds to the aspiring artist's query with an answer that is ingeniously incorporated in Moschou's reflective part.

In the short poetry collection, *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates*, Aristeidis Kleiotis explores the intersections between testimonial writing and healing through an evocative ‘trail’ to self-cognition and/or self-empowerment. The collection is a jagged exploration of a young scholar’s ‘trauma,’ vocalized in the persona’s retracing of the past in order to recuperate from the experiences of oppression in academia. In the reflective part, Kleiotis invites his previous poetic writings to showcase his rite of passage to agency and *la facultad*, leading to the triumphant release from tension when he weans himself off supervised reading/writing.

In her short story “A Place of One’s Own,” Christine Koukourava looks into the ‘mechanics’ of self-formation in the borderland space of a Greek town, where three different national, cultural and linguistic identities meet. Koukourava’s *testimonio* attends to the connections between her personal experience growing up in the ‘East-West’ borderlands and numerous Chicana/o writings she has read during the course. Eventually, she aligns with Cherríe Moraga’s liminal “*space occupying the middle of the sofa*,” resolving to embrace hybridity as an indispensable dimension of her self-identity.

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