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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Linda J. Craft. *Novels of Testimony and Resistance in Central America.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997. x + 237 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1508-8.

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Published on H-LatAm (September, 1998)

As the title states, Professor Craft's text focuses on Central American writers. Perhaps the most well known to U.S. readers will be Claribel Alegria, the author of *Flowers from the Volcano*, translated by American poet Carolyn Forche. Craft's first and second chapters attempt to demonstrate the theoretical underpinnings and historical development of the novel in Central America. Chapters Three through Six are devoted to individual treatments of the writers Alegria, Argueta, Arias, and Belli. The conclusion discusses, then, Craft's final views about Central American *testimonio*. In terms of topic, the referenced writers, while well known to Central American readers, are unfortunately too often unknown to U.S. readers. For that reason alone, this text offers a fair survey and a good literary history of key figures in Central American literary studies.

Professor Craft's *Novels of Testimony and Resistance in Central America* should interest Hispanists working on *testimonio*, scholars interested in the Latin American novel as a political intervention, and all those engaged in a rethinking of the relationship between literature and witness. It should also warrant attention from academics working in feminist studies as well as individuals interested in human rights' movements.

The text begins with Professor Craft informing her readers that she became interested in Central America and felt inspired to write this book because of her personal experiences in El Salvador fifteen years ago (p. ix). This honest statement of identification is a common flashpoint for U.S. academics working in this field. However, while my sympathies are similar to Professor Craft's, I have two reservations about the stylistic and theoretical underpinnings of this text. First, although the first two chapters try to highlight the "hybridity" of the text, Professor Craft's excessive use of terminology from almost all western theoretical projects of the eighties and nineties tends to obscure her argument's focus. Perhaps this particular lack of precision in her text mirrors the current controversy and confusion over the role of testimonial texts in relation to literature and aesthetics in general. Second, this imprecision is compounded through Professor Craft's constant use of polemics in these first two chapters: instead of documentation, Craft routinely offers a polemical cant which appears to be grounded in her identification with the subjects of her study.

However, if readers wade through these first two chapters, they will encounter in the third chapter on Claribel Alegria an extremely provocative thesis that explores the significance of testimonial literature as political and aesthetic intervention in Latin America. In fact, it is here that Craft actually grounds the testimonial novel in relation to some implicit assumptions about western aesthetic experience. In this chapter, Craft discusses Alegria's work in terms of its chronological and biographical development, as well as Alegria's theoretical innovations. Craft's most insightful ideas develop around her analysis of Alegria and Flakoll's *Cenizas de Izalco*. In Craft's analysis, the Central American novel is a testimonial hybrid. Hybridity, as she describes it, brings together the two disparates of poetic and factual truth so that readers experience these truths together rather than oppositionally.

Theoretically, this notion of hybridity might seem to suggest the western narrative of *mimesis*, art imtiating or, in this case, documenting life. In other words, testimonial novels would, then, be analyzable according to traditional narrative strategies. But Craft reminds us that these texts are not traditional, and she grounds that claim by referring to a series of interviews conducted with the authors. This reminder specifically reinforces her concluding thesis that poetic truth and factual truth are blended in testimonial novels. Some have rephrased this thesis to claim that history and memory–in conjunction with the imagination–produce literature. The role of the faculties in traumatic experience and the constitution of the subject are at stake, then, in Central American testimonial texts. In fact, Alegria's remarks as Craft quotes

them are really quite profound: El Salvador's reality "is so incredible, so incandescent, so tremendous, that we don't need to invent anything" (p. 5). Alegria's displacement of invention, usually the province of imagination, suggests that other cognitive faculties are behind the construction of the Central American testimonial text.

To a social scientist, this thesis might seem a non-issue since ethnography has long been a model for analyzing literature. However, to a literary critic and philosopher, this idea strikes at the core of a western theory of literature in which literature is produced through the imagination's liberation. Craft's claim that Alegria's fiction derives from Alegria's experience as a witness of historical trauma, then, is really quite innovative and belongs with a general rethinking of the role of literature in cultural transformation because it suggests that these texts are generated through the unnatural coming together of traumatic memory, imagination, and historically-imposed witness.

Thus I believe the core of Craft's analysis is glimpsed in her discussion of description versus prescription in the chapter on Alegria. In *Cenizas de Izalco*, Alegria and Flakoll approach descriptively rather than prescriptively the problem of the Other as they portray unequal gender relationships and political, social, and economic discrimination. Theirs is certainly a voice of protest in the face of injustice. However, the final chapters of the novel–in which we witness the tragic massacre of Izalco, Isabel's farewell to Frank, Frank's return to alcoholism and self-destruction, and Carmen's realization that she is as trapped in her marriage to Paul as was her mother in hers–do not synthesize the disparate strands of oppression into any overarching cause, explanation, or solution, nor do they transcend the inauthentic existence lived out by each character. The last page signals unfinished business as the shovelfuls of dirt thrown onto Isabel's grave cover up, rather than reveal, everything (p. 82).

Indicative of Craft's analysis overall, this passage suggests that prescription cannot provide a "synthesis of disparate strands of oppression." Thus description–in aesthetic terms, *mimesis*–bears the burden to do more than just relate the facts and that complexity highlights an extremely modern problem: sometimes the exact reproduction of the facts obscures as well as reveals the truth. Although this reasoning may appear "a slippery slope," Craft still explores the boundaries of description as boundaries which have already been breached by extreme circumstances. In extremity, then, description provides a knowledge that well exceeds the parameters of knowledge. In other words, description in extremity discloses at the same time that it forecloses. For academics working in Latin American studies, Holocaust studies, and genocide studies, this argument has been advanced by several well-known writers. Craft's particular gift has been the reimagining of this argument in terms of Central American literature. She poses literature as the key intersection where description gains this added dimension. Thus literature becomes crucial to the struggle for political reform in Central America.

Personally, I would have liked to see a chapter on Roque Dalton discussed in this text. I think his omission weakens certain dimensions of the text. Moreover, for Professor Craft's next book, I would like to see the publication of the interviews conducted for this text. They appear to be both foundational and provocative in the further analysis of testimonial literatures.

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Citation: Kitty Millet. Review of Craft, Linda J., *Novels of Testimony and Resistance in Central America*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2296

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