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Bowskill, S. (2022). “Dar Testimonio” as a Form of Solidarity and a Lens for Rethinking the Mexican Literary Canon. In A. Holmes, & P. Kumaraswami (Eds.), *Latin American Literature in Transition 1930-1980* (Vol. 4, pp. 149-163). (Latin American Literature in Transition). Cambridge University Press.

### **Published in:**

Latin American Literature in Transition 1930-1980

### **Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

### **Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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## **“Dar testimonio” as a Lens for Rethinking the Mexican Literary Canon**

Sarah E. L. Bowskill

**Abstract:** This chapter reconsiders mid-century Mexican literary history through the lens of the concept of bearing witness (“dar testimonio”). Taking speeches by Rosario Castellanos and Miguel Angel Asturias as its starting point, the chapter argues that the idea of bearing witness and expressing solidarity with marginalised groups shaped Latin American and specifically Mexican literature in the period 1930-1980. Looking again at the Mexican canon in this period from this fresh perspective an overlooked tradition of women authors emerges. These women write out of solidarity with and to bear witness to the experiences and sufferings of less privileged others. Women authors are often grouped together on the basis of their gender. Yet, this chapter identifies alternative connections between better known Mexican women authors such as Elena Poniatowska, Nellie Campobello and Rosario Castellanos and others who are less often the focus of critical attention including Benita Galeana, Carlota O’Neill, Ascensión Hernández de León-Portilla, Elvira Vargas. Focusing on the act of bearing witness brings to the fore the contributions of women authors and the connections between them as well as encouraging us to consider alternative ways of writing literary history based on new categories and periodizations.

**Keywords:** *testimonio*, women’s writing, Mexico, Rosario Castellanos, Benita Galeana, Elena Poniatowska, Nellie Campobello, Carlota O’Neill, Ascensión Hernández de León-Portilla, Elvira Vargas

On the occasion of the first FERIA del Libro y Festival de la Cultura (Book Fair and Festival of Culture) held in 1964 in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, Rosario Castellanos gave a speech entitled “La novela mexicana contemporánea y su valor testimonial.” (The Contemporary Mexican novel and its value as testimony”).<sup>1</sup> In this speech Castellanos declared that, since its inception the Mexican novel “ha sido, no un pasatiempo de ociosos ni un alarde de imaginativos ni un ejercicio de retóricos, sino algo más: un instrumento útil para captar nuestra realidad y para expresarla, para conferirle sentido y perdurabilidad” (has not been an idle hobby, a show of the imagination or an exercise in rhetoric, but something more: a useful tool to capture and express our reality, to give it meaning and durability) (Castellanos 223). In his 1967 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize for Literature Miguel Angel Asturias picked up on this idea of the testimonial value of the novel when he said that the role of the novelist was not to entertain but to bear witness (“dar testimonio”). The capacity for bearing witness, in his view, was not limited to any particular genre. For both Castellanos and Asturias, the pressing issue of the moment was to bear witness to the indigenous populations of the Americas but, as Castellanos indicated, the testimonial role of the novel had a much longer history. This history has, to some extent, been obscured by narrower and more recent debates about the *testimonio* genre. Refocusing our attention on how, in a broad sense, Mexican letters bear witness enables us to rethink the twentieth-century literary canon and its continued domination by male authors and by what Castellanos succinctly referred to as the “novela nacional (national novel).”<sup>2</sup>

As Jaime Peres Blanes reports, the idea of *testimonio* as genre came to the fore when the Casa de las Américas prize for *testimonio* was established in 1970 because, in the preceding year, the jury had wanted to recognise changes occurring in Latin American literature but some of the texts they wished to reward did not fit the established categories of novel, short story, poetry and essay (193). The creation of the Casa de las Américas prize thus represents a significant moment when there was a narrowing of understanding around the concept of

*testimonio* compared to the way “dar testimonio” had been used only a few years earlier by Castellanos and Asturias. It is this earlier understanding of “dar testimonio” as an act of solidarity with the marginalised that this chapter seeks to reprise.

In returning to this prior understanding I suggest that we take a step back from the debates over the definition of *testimonio* as a separate genre. These discussions, many of which connect to the decision to include *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú (I, Rigoberta Menchú)* on the “Western Civilization” course of the Stanford curriculum, led to competing definitions of *testimonio* which were then problematized almost to the point of exhaustion.<sup>3</sup> *Testimonio* in these debates became a literary problem about generic boundaries and definitions. Instead, I propose, the concept of “dar testimonio” may prove more useful as a guiding concept for understanding a tradition of writing in Mexico which is based on an engagement with the “other” in a relationship of solidarity. In so doing, a different history of Mexican literature emerges to the one that has been told to date.

Solidarity is typically seen as being at the heart of the *testimonio* genre as the text tends to be based on an alliance between someone in a position of relative privilege and a subaltern or marginalised subject. As Asturias’ Nobel speech makes clear, solidarity is also fundamental to his understanding of “dar testimonio” (bearing witness). Tracing the origins of witnessing back to pre-conquest accounts of heroic legends, Asturias argued that contemporary authors were writing “dentro de la tradición constante de compromiso con nuestros pueblos” (“from within the constant tradition of commitment to our communities”) in solidarity with groups including those whose land has been dispossessed and plantation workers as “[n]uestras novelas buscan movilizar en el mundo las fuerzas morales que han de servirnos para defender a esos hombres” (“our novels seek to move the moral forces in the world that have to serve us in defending these men”). This use of “hombres” (men) and the absence of women in Asturias’ list of marginalised groups is, sadly, not surprising.

For Asturias and Castellanos, bearing witness to the experiences of marginalised groups as an act of solidarity is at the heart of an origins myth for Latin American and Mexican literature respectively. It is therefore telling that Asturias' account excludes women as either the subject or the authors of such texts. Yet, as will be seen, women authors writing in different genres were bearing witness to the experiences of marginalised groups. By bearing witness to the experiences of other marginalised groups at a time when they were also marginalised Mexican women authors in particular can be said to build coalitions at the margins which challenge official conceptualisations of who belongs to the *we* of the nation.

In Latin American literature, the period covered by the present volume (1930-1980) is often seen as a time before which women authors emerged onto the literary scene.<sup>4</sup> While women were undoubtedly writing in this earlier period, this era is perhaps most commonly associated with the emergence of the male-dominated “boom” and magical realism.<sup>5</sup> In Mexico, following the search for a virile literature in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, the novel of the Revolution emerged as the driving force behind the nation's fiction.<sup>6</sup> In a very real sense, this literature, especially in its early years, gave testimony or bore witness to the events during the conflict and some of the preeminent authors, including, for example, Mariano Azuela and Martín Luis Guzmán had firsthand experience of it. However, with the exception of Nellie Campobello's 1931 novel *Cartucho. Relatos de la lucha en el norte de México* (1988; *Cartucho. Tales of the Struggle in Northern Mexico*), women authors seldom feature in the literary history of the immediate post-revolutionary period.

Subsequently, women authors struggled to fit into the categories used in histories of Mexican literature. The prevailing periodization of twentieth-century Mexican literature can be ascertained by looking at histories of Mexican literature. Emmanuel Carballo, Julio Jiménez Rueda, José Luis Martínez and Christopher Domínguez Michael, as I have argued elsewhere, are among those who had a defining influence on the formation of the twentieth-century

Mexican literary canon.<sup>7</sup> In the first edition of his *Diecinueve protagonistas de la literatura mexicana del siglo XX* (*Nineteen Protagonists of 20th Century Mexican Literature*), for example, Emmanuel Carballo divides his authors into the following five groups: the ‘Ateneo de la Juventud’ (‘Athenaeum of Youth’), ‘El colonialismo’ (those interested in the colonial period as a source of national spirit), ‘Los contemporáneos’ (‘The Contemporaries Group’), ‘Narradores de la Revolución y Posrevolucionarios’ (‘Narrators of the Revolution and Post-Revolution’) and ‘Escritores Jóvenes’ (‘Young Writers’). Two women, Nellie Campobello and Rosario Castellanos, are included. A later edition from 1986 also included Elena Garro. No further women were added to the 1994 edition despite there being by that time a body of scholarship on Mexican women authors. Many of the same categories are found in other histories of literature such as *La literatura Mexicana del siglo XX* (*Mexican Literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*) which was a collaboration between Martínez and Domínguez Michael updating Martínez’s earlier *Literatura Mexicana siglo XX* (*20<sup>th</sup> Century Mexican Literature*) which was first published in 1949 and then frequently revised. In the contents pages only one woman, Asunción Izquierdo Albiñana (Ana Mairena), is included in the section ‘Escritores Independientes’ (‘Independent Writers’). Although more women are mentioned in the text itself they are not singled out as deserving of special attention.

When Mexican women authors in the period 1930-1980 have been recovered and recognised by feminist scholarship little seems to connect their work other than gender and nationality. The diversity of women’s contributions and the fact that they cannot be accommodated into a coherent overarching narrative could be considered a hindrance when it comes to securing them a place in the Mexican literary canon. Where connections between mid-century Mexican women authors have emerged the focus has been on the Revolution and on better known authors such as Campobello, Poniatowska and Garro.<sup>8</sup> This chapter suggests that more connections are yet to be recognised.

In her study of women writers associated with the so-called “boom femenino” of women’s writing post-1980, Emily Hind suggests: “With a telescope, Mexican women’s work in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries appears as a grouping of unrelated planets [...] By switching the telescope for a microscope, however, the critic discovers that beneath the obvious atmospheric disparities among the “boom femenino” texts there lies a common molecular core of shared thematics” (51). Could “dar testimonio” be one of the core thematics connecting women writers before the “boom femenino” in the period 1930-1980?

The following analysis proposes to build on more established links connecting Campobello, Poniatowska and Garro to explore the ways in which we might start to further connect these three Mexican women, and others writing in the period who are less widely known, by viewing their work as giving testimony, as an act of solidarity with the “Other.” I do not intend to suggest that these women influenced one another. Rather, I suggest that, taken together, these texts spanning half a century and viewed through the lens of “dar testimonio” come together to foreground an alternative history of watershed moments of transition in twentieth-century Mexico as marginalised groups struggled to be heard; and, I propose, the existence of these texts may have been pivotal in shifting from a male-dominated canon and society to increased opportunities for women and the advent of women writers into the mainstream in the late twentieth century.

### **“Dar testimonio” and the Mexican Revolution**

As has been noted, perhaps the best established connection between mid-century Mexican women authors is a shared interest in the Revolution but viewing this interest in the broader context of bearing witness leads us to uncover other links. Writing about the Mexican Revolution is the cornerstone of the twentieth-century Mexican literary canon and Elena Poniatowska is perhaps Mexico’s best-known author of *testimonio*. In 1969, a year before the

Casa de las Américas prize for *testimonio* was established, Poniatowska published *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (2001; *Here's to You, Jesusa!*). The text is about Josefina Bórquez's experience as a *soldadera* (female soldier) during the Revolution and her life afterwards. The following year, Poniatowska became the first woman to win the Premio Mazatlán de Literatura (Mazatlán Prize for Literature) for what one contemporary critic described as a "testimonio y novela" (testimony and novel) ("El Premio Mazatlán").<sup>9</sup> While Doris Sommer suggests that the concept of a "testimonial novel" is a "contradiction in terms between immediacy and manipulation" (914) and Deborah Shaw suggest that critics have been caught up in debates as to "whether the text is a novel, a testimonial, an autobiography or a hybrid containing elements of all these" (119), it seems that these distinctions were less important for Mexico's critical establishment and reading public at the time, possibly owing to the currency of the concept of "dar testimonio" which provides a way of reconciling these supposed contradictions.

Selling over 20,000 copies in its first year, *Hasta no verte* was very well received. In contrast, Campobello's earlier text *Cartucho*, which bears witness to experiences of the Revolution in the north of Mexico through the eyes of a child narrator, took longer to be recognised. As Poniatowska herself wrote, Campobello was long overlooked and "of all the novelists of the Revolution she is the one who gets the least notice" (x). *Cartucho* was probably overlooked because of its glorification of Pancho Villa who, as Ilene O'Malley notes, took longer to be accepted into official narratives of the unified Revolution.<sup>10</sup> Confronted with Villa's omission from the institutionalised Revolution and the accompanying erasure of the suffering endured by populations such as those featured in her stories, Campobello's text provided an alternative to the official history of the revolution. This desire to correct established narratives and bear witness on behalf of the marginalised is perhaps most evident when the narrator reveals that, contrary to what was believed, revolutionary Colonel Nacha Ceniceros was not dead and the accepted version of events was untrue: "Ahora digo, y lo digo con la voz



del que ha podido destejer una mentira: ¡Viva Nacha Ceniceros, coronela de la revolución!” (“Now I say, and I say it with the voice of someone who has been able to unravel a lie, long live Nacha Ceniceros, Colonel in the Revolution!”) (Campobello 107).

In her “Introduction” to the English translation of *Cartucho*, Poniatowska’s description further draws attention to the text as being borne out of a desire to “dar testimonio” to lived experience. She writes: “Nellie doesn’t invent anything she tells; she saw, she lived, she recorded it all” (xi). Yet to suggest that *Cartucho* is an autobiography is to do a disservice to the way in which Campobello so clearly constructs the perspective from which she wishes to tell “her” story. It also ignores the way in which the narrator frequently draws attention to the sources who are people with whom she identifies from her community and whose memory she wishes to honour. For example, in “La muleta de Pablo López” (Pablo López’s Crutch), the narrator begins: “Todos comentaban aquel fusilamiento, dijo Mamá [...] ella no lo vio porque estaba en Parral. Martín se lo contó todo” (“Everyone talked about that execution, said Mother [...] she did not see it because she was in Parral. Martín told her everything”) (Campobello 125). Similarly, at the start of “Tomás Urbina” the narrator states “Mi tío abuelo lo conoció muy bien [...] Y narra, como si fuera un cuento, que el general Tomás Urbina nació en Nieves, Durango, un día 18 de agosto del año de 1877” (“My great uncle knew him very well. And he tells it as if it were a story that General Tomás Urbina was born in Nieves, Durango on the 18th August in the year 1877”) (Campobello 127). And in “Los hombres de Urbina” (“Urbina’s Men”) she begins by underscoring the reliability of her sources: “Le contaron a Mamá todo lo que había pasado. Ella no olvidaba. Aquellos hombres habían sido sus paisanos” (“They told Mother everything that had happened. She did not forget. Those men had been her countrymen”) (Campobello 119). By drawing in these other voices, as Meyer suggests, the narrator “collectivizes her testimony” (52) and *Cartucho* “crosses the boundaries between autobiography and testimony” (47). The account is both Campobello’s and that of the people

in her community with whom she feels solidarity as she and they suffered so much only to be written out of official history.

*Cartucho* is the best known of Campobello's works, but in *Apuntes sobre la vida militar de Pancho Villa* (1940; *Notes on the Military Career of Pancho Villa*) she also bore witness and drew on the testimonies of others to do so.<sup>11</sup> But her impulse to bear witness through writing went beyond the Revolution. Campobello also wrote *Ritmos indígenas de México* (1940; *Indigenous Rhythms of Mexico*). However, this text was omitted from her complete works as published by the Fondo de Cultura Económica in which Juan Bautista Aguilar described it as “una veta inacabada por descubrir en su interpretación literaria” (an untapped vein whose literary interpretation is yet to be discovered) (26). In *Ritmos* she turned her attention to recording aspects of indigenous life, and particularly traditional dance, in Mexico. Rather than being seen as an aside from Nellie Campobello's main body of work, viewing it through the lens of “dar testimonio” gives it a more central position in her oeuvre, it gives Campobello relevance beyond the novel of the Revolution and connects her to other women authors who also wrote about indigenous populations.

### **“Dar testimonio” and Mexico's Indigenous Populations**

As one of Mexico's best known women authors, Rosario Castellanos is recognised for her writings that bear witness to the experiences of indigenous communities and reflect on her own marginalised position as a woman in a patriarchal society. *Balún Canán* (*The Nine Guardians*) (1957), *Ciudad Real* (*City of Kings*) (1960) and *Oficio de tinieblas* (*The Book of Lamentations*) (1962) are all examples of a new kind of *indigenista* literature which challenged official discourses and showcased “the authors' more intimate knowledge of indigenous cultures and their incorporation of myth and literary tradition (both written and oral) into their narratives along with the observations they made by living or working in indigenous communities, often

as anthropologists” (O’Connell, 61). *Indigenista* literature is an established category in histories of Mexican literature but, with the exception of Castellanos, women’s contributions are often overlooked. Like many of Castellanos’ works, María Lombardo de Caso’s novel, *La culebra tapó el río* (1962; *The Snake Blocked the River*), was also set in Chiapas and belongs to the same tradition of witnessing and *indigenista* literature but it is less well known.

Other women authors who used their writings to “dar testimonio” regarding the experiences of indigenous populations include Graciela Santana Fuentes de Szymanski, who drew on oral accounts of family and friends in Jalisco and from her work in indigenous communities to write *Voces de Tepozpizaloya* (1974; *Voices from Tepozpizaloya*), and Elvira Vargas.<sup>12</sup> Vargas was part of a generation of women journalists who, through their work in the national press, contributed to current debates.<sup>13</sup> Vargas wrote *Por las rutas del sureste* (1939; *Along the Roads of the South East*) while reporting on President Lázaro Cárdenas’ tour of Chiapas, Campeche, Tabasco, Yucatán and Quintana Roo. While Castellanos connects the marginalisation of women and that of indigenous communities, Thea Pitman observes that Vargas elects not to write about women’s position in society. Nevertheless, Pitman notes that it is significant that Vargas, as a women, chose to speak out in solidarity with other marginalised groups because:

al defender la causa de los indígenas y las comunidades campesinas sin derechos de los alejados rincones de la República, Vargas está dando implícitamente a las mujeres —otro grupo despojado de sus derechos— una voz: estas son las voces heterogéneas y alternativas que pueden desafiar las versiones oficiales de la identidad nacional (Pitman 140-41).

By defending the cause of the indigenous peoples and rural communities deprived of their rights in the far flung corners of the

Republic Vargas is implicitly giving women – another group deprived of their rights – a voice: these are the heterogeneous voices that can challenge official versions of national identity

The same is true of the other women authors discussed in this chapter. By bearing witness to the marginalisation of others they can be said to be working to overcome their own marginalisation.

### **“Dar testimonio” - Life in Exile and the Spanish Civil War**

The arrival of Spanish exiles as a result of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) had a significant impact on the Mexican cultural scene and on Mexican literature yet the resulting body of literature rarely features in histories of Mexican literature. The influence of these exiles and their texts which often bear witness to their experiences in Spain and in Mexico is brought to the fore by a focus on “dar testimonio.” In *España desde México. Vida y testimonio de transterrados* (1978; *Spain from Mexico. Lives and Testimonies of Expatriates*), Ascensión Hernández de León-Portilla, herself a Spaniard who took Mexican nationality as a result of marriage to a Mexican historian rather than due to enforced exile, gathered together the testimonies of a group of exiles including authors, artists and intellectuals.<sup>14</sup> In her selection of people to interview, Hernández explains that she interviewed academics from a different disciplines who came from different regions of Spain and held different political positions on the left. Only one interviewee, Elvira Gascón, was a woman. While Hernández connects her work to the emerging discipline of oral history, and her subjects are from privileged backgrounds and so are able to participate in the editorial process, there are clear parallels with the approach adopted in the *testimonio* genre and her introduction speaks to her being motivated by a desire to “dar testimonio” and, like Campobello, to correct misconceptions and misunderstandings. In her case, she explains that she hopes to correct an overwhelmingly

negative perception of Spain, to recover the memory of forgotten Republican exiles and to contribute to a new atmosphere of hope that she sees as emerging in Spain since the end of 1974.

Hernández's text repeatedly reminds us that the accounts she has gathered are part of Mexican history as much as they are part of Spanish history just as her text should be considered as part of both the Mexican and Spanish testimonial tradition. The sixteen testimonies are preceded by a lengthy introductory study by Hernández divided into three parts. Two of the three essays deal with the exiles' experiences in Mexico and Mexico-Spanish relations further emphasising the relevance of these exiles for Mexico and Mexican readers.

Carlota O'Neill's memoir, that was popular among Mexican readers, also bears witness to her experiences during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>15</sup> In exile, O'Neill acquired Mexican nationality and published her multivolume memoir *Una mujer en la Guerra de España* (1964; *A Woman in the Spanish Civil War*), *Romanzas de las rejas* (1964; *Music from Behind Bars*) and *Los muertos también hablan* (1971; *The Dead Also Speak*). Like other Spanish exiles who wrote about their experiences in Europe from their newly adopted country, O'Neill's work could be seen more as part of a Spanish literary tradition than a Mexican one. Yet, as Catherine O'Leary points out, "Carlota's account of her experiences survives because it was written and published when she was in exile" (160). For O'Neill and others being in Mexico was fundamental to enabling their testimony and many now identified as Mexican.

Hernández notes that "[c]on particular intensidad, de 1940 a 1960, libros, folletos, revistas y periódicos sobre temas españoles inundaron el ámbito editorial mexicano" (15) (with particular intensity between 1940 and 1960 books, pamphlets, magazines and newspapers on Spanish topics flooded the Mexican publishing scene). She also refers to the hundreds of accounts that exist "debidos a transterrados que en México han tomado la pluma para recoger y comunicar sus propios puntos de vista" (15) ("due to expatriates who have picked up their

pens in Mexico to gather together and communicate their point of view”). This rich vein of literature born out of solidarity with the Republican cause perhaps contributed to the popularity of the concept of “dar testimonio” and ultimately to the emergence of the *testimonio* genre. Reconsidering Mexican literature through the lens of “dar testimonio,” and writing in solidarity with others, brings texts about the Spanish civil war and experiences of the resulting exile into sharper focus in relation to the broader Mexican canon, and reveals how literature reflected a moment of transition within the Mexican cultural scene and the history of immigration in Mexico.

### **“Dar testimonio” – Workers and Student Movements**

Women authors also used their texts to bear witness to other moments of struggle, transition and transformation in Mexico’s history. Famously, Elena Poniatowska’s *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971; *Massacre in Mexico*, 1991) bore witness to the student protests of 1968. Combining images, eye witness accounts and creative responses Poniatowska’s multivocal text subtitled “Testimonios de historia oral” is “by far the most widely read and most frequently studied text in a corpus of works that are normally categorised as ‘Tlatelolco literature’” (Harris 483-4). Less well known, but in a similar vein to her earlier work is Poniatowska’s *El tren pasa primero* (2006; *The Train Passes First*) about the trade union movement and railway strikes of the late 1950s which can be seen as antecedents of the student movement. Interestingly, another better known Mexican author, Elena Garro, also wrote about these strikes and the government repression of the period in *Y Matarazo no llamó* (*And Matarazo did not call*).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, while Garro is not usually associated with politically engaged writing, the concept of “dar testimonio,” nevertheless provides an interesting angle from which to review works including *Y matarazo* and the play, *Felipe Ángeles* (1967) about the revolutionary general, which tend to be eclipsed by her novel, *Los recuerdos del porvenir* (1963; *Recollection of Things to Come*).

Earlier women authors also bore witness to workers' struggles, although their texts may be less well known. As well as writing about the plight of the indigenous population, Elvira Vargas documented the experiences of the oil workers in *Lo que vi en la tierra del petróleo* (1938; *What I Saw in the Land of Oil*). In this text, Vargas gathers newspaper articles chronicling her "impresiones personales acerca de la vida de los trabajadores en los campos petroleros" (3) ("personal impressions of the lives of the oilfield workers"). Her first person account is interspersed with the voices of those she met including the American bosses and the women living in the poor quality housing provided for workers. Vargas' account is clearly partisan and written in solidarity with both Cárdenas' government policy of renationalising the oil industry and the workers whose lives she describes. Thus, in a report on the Poza Rica region she says she will focus not on statistical data but on "cómo lucha cómo vive la gente, qué quiere y qué exige con todo derecho. Y con esta descripción, será posible, tal vez, formarse un juicio sobre la necesidad imperativa de que la justice llegue a los hombres olvidados que aun sus esfuerzo en este rincón de la Patria enfrentándose al imperialismo extranjero" (20) ("how the people live and struggle, what they rightly want and demand. And with this description it will be possible, perhaps, to form a judgement about the imperative for justice for these forgotten men who combine their efforts in this corner of the Fatherland standing up to foreign imperialism").

Another woman who documented the still earlier struggles of Mexican workers was Benita Galeana. In *Benita*, published in 1994 but written in 1940, she describes her life focusing on her childhood and experiences in the Mexican Communist Party spanning a period from 1907-1938/9.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Galeana connects the campaign for worker's rights with what we might consider her nascent feminist consciousness and as much as writing in solidarity with the Communist Party and especially those, like her, who had experienced the violent repression of the PCM under Presidents Emilio Portes Gil (1928-30) and Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930-32),

Galeana also writes to bear witness to the plight of woman and out of solidarity with other women whose suffering she observes.

Writing in 2000, Beth Jörgensen noted with surprise that “*Benita* is still relatively little known and little studied in spite of new editions in Mexico in 1974, 1979 and 1990, and an English translation appeared in the U.S. in 1994” (47). Reviewing the limited existing literature on *Benita*, Jörgensen concludes: “All three critics refer to *Benita* rather loosely as *testimonio* and/or autobiography, but they do not situate the terms in the current critical debate” (48). The critics, it seems, sense that *Benita* is bearing witness, but when the text is scrutinised with reference to the narrow parameters of the *testimonio* genre, it is found wanting. In Jörgensen’s words, “For today’s reader the text appears to participate in the conventions of traditional autobiography and contemporary testimony while simultaneously challenging generic expectations in both directions” (48). By focusing on literatures which bear witness (*dar testimonio*) as an act of solidarity texts such as *Benita* could come to occupy a clearer place in Mexican literary history.

### **Conclusion**

Taking as its point of departure statements by two prominent authors writing in the period 1930-1980, this chapter has taken the idea of “*dar testimonio*”, giving testimony, as an act of solidarity with the “Other” and used it as a lens to see on how it might lead to new ways of viewing the existing categorization and periodization of Mexican literature, how it might reveal connections between Mexican women authors in the period, and how it might bring to the fore less well known texts by women authors. The scope of this chapter dictates that the examples given are only a selection of the many that could be mentioned. It may also be possible to present a different selection of texts by male authors also bearing witness, or to fall back on an



emphasis on the “novela nacional” (“national novel”) to argue that testimony was not central to the Mexican canon.<sup>18</sup> Be that as it may, I do not seek here to argue that we *ought* to reorganise the Mexican canon around the concepts of testimony and solidarity with the sense that doing so would allow the “correct” canon to emerge. Rather, the aim has been to show that in this period the idea that literature should bear witness had a currency which may have had a more profound influence than has been recognised, and that *it is possible* to reimagine the canon around this axis, and that the results are of interest. The new canon casts light on established texts and gives new prominence to others. It foregrounds moments of transition in which marginalised groups which had been forgotten and misrepresented by hegemonic narratives and discourses tried to negotiate their entry into the nation and shows that women authors felt solidarity with their marginalised subjects even as they were only too aware of women’s own challenges. At the start of the period in question women authors struggled to find their voice. By the end of it, often by lending their voice to the voiceless, women authors had claimed their own voice and were increasingly being heard.

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<sup>1</sup> The speech was subsequently published as Rosario Castellanos, "La novela mexicana contemporánea y su valor testimonial," *Hispania* vol. 47 no. 2 May 1964, pp.223-230. Quotations are taken from this published version.

<sup>2</sup> By "novela nacional" Castellanos was referring to those works which aimed to present a totalising view of Mexico. Examples she discusses include the novels of Agustín Yáñez, Juan Rulfo and Carlos Fuentes.

<sup>3</sup> On the difficulties of defining *testimonio* and its relationship to other genres see Strejilevich, Nora. "Genres of the Real: Testimonio, Autobiography, and the Subjective turn." *Cambridge History of Latin American Women's Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 433-447 and Volek, Emil. "Testimonial Writing" in Verity Smith ed. *Encyclopedia of Latin American Literature*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997. 783-785.

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<sup>4</sup> On the emergence of the so-called “boom femenino” after this period in Mexico see Jane Lavery and Nuala Finnegan eds., *The Boom Femenino Mexicano: Reading Mexican Women’s Writing* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> On Mexican women’s writing before 1980 see, for example, Elena Urrutia ed. *Nueve escritoras mexicanas nacidas en la primera mitad del siglo XX, y una revista* (Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres. El Colegio de México, 2006). [http://cedoc.inmujeres.gob.mx/documentos\\_download/100798.pdf](http://cedoc.inmujeres.gob.mx/documentos_download/100798.pdf) and Fabienne Bradu, *Señas particulares, escritora. Ensayos sobre escritoras mexicanas del siglo XX* (Mexico: FCE, 1987). The work of the Taller de Teoría y Crítica Literaria Diana Morán and the series “Desbordar el canon. Escritoras mexicanas del siglo XX” have also been instrumental in bringing to light a tradition of Mexican women’s writing.

<sup>6</sup> On the debates around “virile” literature see: John E. Englekirk, “The «Discovery» of Los de abajo,” *Hispania*, 1935, 18:1, pp. 53-62; Robert McKee Irwin, *Mexican Masculinities*, (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2003); Víctor Díaz Arciniega, *Querrela por la cultura “revolucionaria” (1925)* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1989); Max Parra, *Writing Pancho Villa’s Revolution: Rebels in the Literary Imagination of Mexico* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> See: Sarah E.L. Bowskill, *Gender, Nation and the Formation of the Twentieth Century Mexican Literary Canon* (Oxford: Legenda, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> On these connections see: Meyer, Doris. “The Dialogics of Testimony. Autobiography as Shared Experience in Nellie Campobello’s *Cartucho*.” Anny Brooksbank Jones and Catherine Davies eds. *Latin American Women’s Writing. Feminist Readings in Theory and Crisis*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. 46-65, p.46; Poniatowska, Elena ‘Introduction’ in Nellie Campobello, *Cartucho and My Mother’s Hands* transl. by Doris Meyer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), vii-xiv, p.x; Klahn, Norma. “Campobello, Nellie” in *Concise Encyclopedia of Mexico* ed. Michael Werner. Routledge ,2015. pp.60-6, p.60 and Ela Molina Sevilla de Morelock, *Relecturas y narraciones femeninas de la Revolución Mexicana: Campobello, Garro, Esquivel y Mastretta* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2013)

<sup>9</sup> “El Premio Literario Mazatlán, otorgado a Elena Poniatowska,” *Novedades*, 17 de febrero 1971 CNL Archive Expediente. Elena Poniatowska.

<sup>10</sup> On the positive reception of *Hasta no verte* see: “El Premio Literario Mazatlán.”

<sup>11</sup> On the use of the widow’s testimony see Poniatowska’s introduction to the English edition and on the possible use of Villa’s own memoirs see Juan Bautista Aguilar, p.22-3

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<sup>12</sup> For a biography of Santana Fuentes de Szymanski see: “Graciela Szymanski” <http://www.elem.mx/autor/datos/125753> [accessed 23/2/2020].

<sup>13</sup> Other women in this group included Esperanza Velázquez Bringas, Adelina Zendejas, Magdalena Mondragón, Rosa Castro and María Luisa Ocampo many of whom also had literary careers beyond their journalism.

<sup>14</sup> *Transterrado* is a neologism coined by Spaniard José Gass in exile in Mexico to refer to those able to make their home in a new country, see Sebastiaan Faber. *Exile and Cultural Hegemony: Spanish Intellectuals in Mexico, 1939-1975*. Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2002, 212-13.

<sup>15</sup> See O’Leary for a biography of O’Neill and on the reception of her work.

<sup>16</sup> Although not published until 1989, *Y matarazó no llamó* the manuscript is dated 1960. See Lucía Melgar. “Silencio y Represión En ‘Y Matarazo No Llamó...’” *Letras Femeninas*. vol. 29.1 (2003): pp. 139–159. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/23021063](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23021063).

<sup>17</sup> On the circumstances surrounding the publication of *Benita*, see Jörgensen, p. 49-50

<sup>18</sup> The concept of “dar testimonio” is clearly relevant, for example, to the works of Carlos Monsiváis and Carlos Montemayor as well as to the male *indigenista* authors writing about Chiapas in the same timeframe as Castellanos such as Ricardo Pozas, Eraclio Zepeda and Carlo Antonio Castro.