

# Review

## ***Voices of the Undocumented***

Val Rosenfeld and Flor Fortunati (eds). Sarasota, FL: First Edition Design Publishing, 2015.

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In the foreword to Val Rosenfeld's *Voices of the Undocumented*, she illustrates the background for the collection of oral histories from immigrants. The immigrants in the collection are primarily from Latin American countries and have arrived in the San Francisco, California area without any documents to provide either residency or other legal status. The precarious nature of their existence in the United States underscores the very essence of this compilation and provides a running theme that connects the narratives of these individuals as told and recorded through oral history. While Rosenfeld refers to a preliminary personal draw to learning about the many men and women who sought out work at the Day Worker Center in San Francisco where she was working as an ESL volunteer, that initial simple interest was expanded to recognize more crucial needs and benefits of expression that are tantamount to human existence. Rosenfeld writes of her early volunteer-related encounters with those frequenting the Center, "I found that I wanted to hear their whole stories—where they came from, how they got here, and how they found their place in this country and community. Since many of the workers have limited proficiency with English, I realized that they needed to tell their stories in the native language in order to convey the details and the associated emotions" (i). With this recognition, and the additional support of Flor Fortunati, another volunteer teacher who would provide translation, this became a reality—the opportunity to express their stories

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in the language they were most familiar with and feel relatively secure that their stories would receive exposure in an appropriate context.

As Rosenfeld continues her description of the setting, she also places a large focus on the communal presence that the Center provides for these undocumented workers, often as a means of promoting a familial, comfortable place to seek out answers or help. As she states later in the introduction:

In addition to its job-finding function, the Center has become a community center for immigrants. Workers come to the Center and ask basic questions, such as: ‘Can you please translate this document?’ ‘Can you help me find a school for my children?’ ‘Where can I find medical care for my family?’ ‘How can I find an apartment to rent or a room to share?’ The Center strives to create an environment in which the workers feel safe asking for help and sharing their problems and concerns. The Center also offers workshops on consumer rights, tenant rights and civil rights. Families are also welcome, including children. The workers can come and eat here, share a meal, and talk to other people while they wait for work. (v)

The Center’s natural position as an advocate for the workers is foundational for Rosenfeld constructing an oral history-based project that draws on the “safe space” effect for the workers. While admittedly many workers professed an anxiety of speaking out at the onset of her project —“worried that by telling their stories, they would endanger their status in the United States” (ii)—the overall environment is projected as a means of carefully and powerfully inserting the individual and collective voices of unspoken experiences into a larger conversation about American identity.

The nature of oral history can often be weighed down in different relationships of power. In its most extreme characterizations oral histories may be dismissed as the efforts of illiterate beings in the face of being erased and under the protective gaze of a benevolent enabler who invites them to “speak” while implying that they lack necessary skills to participate in the dominant, traditional (often “written”) process of historiography. This cold and reductive implication negates the very participation of the speakers and the intended results of their speaking out. As in the Gramscian sense of the *subaltern*,<sup>1</sup> the speakers of oral histories are limited and predetermined to be powerless beings who lack the ability to change or have an effect on their world, either localized or

on a broader scale.<sup>2</sup> What might be more appropriate in dissecting the effects or outcomes of collected oral history projects like Rosenfeld's is to address the power of the work as testimony or *testimonio*. In this genre of literature, the narrative acts as a witness, giving the voice to those who have seen, experienced, or taken in the actuality of a momentous period rather than those who simply seek to report it. In this defined approach to *testimonios*, "testifying" or "bearing witness" to a particular set of experiences becomes the underlying theme. *Testimonio* breaks down the structures of power that present a fully integrated and valid identity status as being tied to a predetermined essential quality: participation in the telling of story/history through the dominant structure of a written narrative that implies a developed *literacy*. The concepts of bearing witness and providing a testimony in an alternative method such as oral history reveals the incorporation of the Other into history through the solidifying aspects of telling one's own story in an alternative structure, recognizing that story as a part of a larger story, and moving beyond fixed constructions (and construction methods) of a historiography.

Seeing *testimonio* in this way necessitates an expansion of the manner in which it has been defined by scholars in the past like John Beverley who characterizes a "provisional definition" in specifics of length, genre, and other characteristics:

By *testimonio* I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is a real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or a significant life experience. (Beverley 2004: 31)

Beverley's definition seemingly restricts the *testimonio* a bit into its written form but ultimately suggests the same core traits that may be extended into other types of texts. He goes on to mention several textual categories that may be subsumed under this definition, including: oral history, memoir, and nonfiction novel among others, and he finishes his characterization with the profession that "any attempt to specify a generic definition for it [*testimonio*], as I do here, is at best provisional, and at worst repressive" (ibid.). This recognition for potential expansion is a crucial means to understand and appreciate these collected oral histories of undocumented day workers that perform the same acts in their oral nature that Beverley and other scholars describe in written texts classified as *testimonio*. As evidence, these stories in Rosenfeld's collection relate the tales of

dramatic immigration, labor injustices, racial discrimination, and other episodes of a precarious existence. This representation acts in conjunction with Beverley's list of outsiders and unrepresented voices, "representing in particular those subjects—the child, the 'native,' the woman, the insane, the criminal, the proletarian—excluded from authorized representation" (ibid.) and works "not only to interpret the world but also to change it" (xvi), ultimately what he and others come to see as a variety of "resistance literature."

With this structure and function in mind, Rosenfeld's collection combines to have an overall effect that is drawn from this sense of resistance or speaking with power from a position deemed to have none. This lack of power is methodically stripped away over the process of engaging with the stories. When working through the individual stories the effects of their oral nature are evident, as well as the spontaneous shifts in subject and perspective common in spoken conversation. Rather than eliminate these, both characteristics are replicated entirely in the written text with little to no editing. The polish and deliberateness of carefully constructed and revised written narratives are absent and instead the urgency and immediacy of lived experience are steered toward the forefront of the stories in place of the manner of presentation. The message supplants the manner of delivery and, more precisely, invokes the manner as a complementary component of that message; the nature of "speaking" is in and of itself an act of powerful resistance and works in conjunction with what the speakers of these life stories are relating.

Individually the stories that Rosenfeld's collection presents are heart wrenchingly dramatic and often filled with tales of dangerous journeys to the United States. Most are delivered in a matter-of-fact voice that, while no doubt is conscious of the severity of the events discussed, has become somewhat traumatized and numbed by the commonality of these events. Among the consistent themes addressed in each of the stories, the most common include: various types of hardship, love and loss of family, past violent experiences, military service, INS encounters, work and money, importance of education, first impressions of the United States, and finding hope.

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, the stories actually convey a more significant effect when presented *en masse* and each of the speaker's voices emerges as a reflection of a collective experience that adds to an ongoing historiography. This effect builds off of the intentions of the editors who expressly surrender the conversation and

message to the workers themselves, limiting editorial interference. Rosenfeld states, “We have made every effort to allow each worker to tell his or her story in his or her own words. To preserve the integrity of their stories, we have presented them as a narrative, as the workers have told them to us” (ii). The outcome is representative of Beverley’s working definition of *testimonio*’s ability to present a story “told in the first person by a narrator who is a real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts” and which seeks “not only to interpret the world but also to change it.” One of the major ways in which the speakers of these many stories enact this self-affirming challenge to a historiography that has marginalized their experiences is in the simple but profound manner of stating the nature of their unsecured status in the United States, verifying the nature of their existence. This is an oft repeated action of introducing themselves in their own story, naming their situation, giving it credibility and implying that it is valid even while noting the worries and stresses that it causes them. In “Ernesto’s Story,”<sup>3</sup> Ernesto, a former civil construction technician from Peru, confirms early in narrative, “It is a bad time in my life, a difficult time. Because right now I do not have documents to work and, indeed, I am illegal in the United States. My visa expired, because I entered legally on a tourist visa and stayed. I overstayed. And I cannot get a job that matches my skills and my education” (21). Along with his resignation to the situation such as it is, Ernesto states, “. . .indeed, I am illegal in the United States” in a way that displays an affirmation of his identity as an undocumented person who is incapable of fulfilling the basic needs and desires of his life, including but not limited to finding a job that suits his advanced education and skills. Similarly, Laura, a former Guatemala government employee, speaks of the complexities of legal status in the United States as well as the ultimate decision to defy the restrictions that are involved:

The process to obtain a U.S. visa is very difficult; they have many requirements. You have to own property: a home, a car, have a bank account and have economic solvency, in order to show that you can pay for your expenses in the United States. . . . The type of visa you get depends on your financial status. Some get it for five years, others for 10 years, others are granted a visa indefinitely. My visa expires in 2018, but is only good to visit the U.S. for six months at a time—and then I need to return to Guatemala. But I am planning to stay—I do not intend to return. (99)

In both cases the speakers are defining their existence and identity up to this point in their lives as well as examining their prospects if they continue to remain in the United States.

In addition to confirming their presence in the United States through their stories, many of the speakers in Rosenfeld's collection are ultimately drawn into their identities as "voices of experience" and seem to be naturally inclined to deliver their testimony with a mix of expression and advice towards potential recipients of their *testimonios*. This moment in which they are speaking with Rosenfeld and Fortunati has provided them an opportunity for reflection that perhaps has not been available to them before. After reciting the details of their lives, their hopes for the future, and their outlook on their experiences, many of the speakers build to a summary statement that seeks a defining purpose with which to conclude their stories such as when Salvador, a manual laborer from Mexico, states, "Life has taught me many things. I have gotten to know many things, good and bad, because life shows you everything... Look I trust everyone. We live better when we trust. I'd like to be remembered as good people" (18), or when Ernesto recounts, "I am an old man. That's the uncertainty that I have. Suddenly, I'm too old... That's my insecurity, that's what worries me. Well, you learn from your mistakes, too" (33), or perhaps most dramatically when Ruben, a former factory worker from Guatemala, laments:

To regret, regret, what's done is done. I regret having come to the United States. Well, life has taught me many things, both good and bad. I tried to ignore the bad and keep the good. But sometimes, as the apostle Paul says, "Why do I do what I should not do and what I should, I do not do." (*Sic*) Every mind is a world on its own, we are human, and we make mistakes. (65)

The emerging idea of a lesson learned or to be learned from the reflection upon their life—no matter what age the speaker is—is indicative of the speaker having reached a moment of "earned insight" and surmounting a figurative peak from where they have a new perspective, and new knowledge worth voicing. In keeping with the reading of this collection as oral histories that serve the function of *testimonios*, the nature of the stories is meant to bring change to a default understanding of our existence. Their speakers have professed their voices into the greater narrative in a manner whose purpose is not to simply report the world as they see it (*knowledge*) but to be able to change or affect that world (*power*). The power of these stories is transferred into "witness accounts"

(knowledge) by adding an underrepresented voice to the historiography of our American society. As Rosenfeld proclaims at the end of the book's introduction and to which there is an implied benefit of completeness or inclusiveness as an end result, "You must know the stories to truly know the people" (ii).

### NOTES

1. The concept of the subaltern comes from Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci and refers to those who have no power in the state or in the class system to which they are tied. Indian scholar Gayatri Spivak took the term and expanded it in Indian post-colonial studies to relate to all people who lack control of their own self-identity based solely on their status within the social system. See Gramsci 1967. See also Spivak 1988.
2. For an example of this symbolic portrayal of society's undesirables and powerless class, consider Chicano author Oscar "Zeta" Acosta's representation of the "cockroach people" in reference to the poor, disenfranchised population of Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles as depicted in his 1973 novel *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*.
3. Each of the chapters in the collection is simply titled with the first name of the speaker as their "story." Rosenfeld says in her introduction, "Only first names have been used and some names and locations have been changed, and pictures omitted, at the request of the worker" (ii).

### REFERENCES

- Beverly, John. (2004). *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press).
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- Spivak, Gayatri. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 271–313.