

(AUTHOR)ITATIVE PERSPECTIVES: THE INFUSION OF SOCIOLOGY AND CRÓNICA WITHIN BRAZILIAN AND COLOMBIAN SHANTYTOWN TESTIMONIAL NARRATIVE

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Resumo: Este artigo analisa o livro de José Alejandro Castaño, *La isla de Morgan* (2003), e o documentário de José Padilha, *Ônibus 174* (2004), como dois exemplos de uma categoria recente de livros e filmes não ficcionais que tematizam a favela na Colômbia e no Brasil. Essas obras abordam um largo espectro de problemas urbanos ao mesmo tempo em que testemunham sobre os fatores econômicos, sociais e políticos que afetam brasileiros e colombianos em deslocamento durante os séculos XX e XXI.

Palavras-chave: Narrativa de testemunho; literatura de periferia; migração e deslocamento; comuna; favela; Colômbia; Brasil.

Notwithstanding the pervasiveness of displacement throughout Latin America,¹ Colombia and Brazil are pronounced cases in the region due to the particular extent and effects of rural-to-urban migration. In both countries, displacement has been a decades-long phenomenon that has resulted in a boom of rapidly growing shantytowns. Adding to this unique proliferation is another feature singular to these two countries – the draw of more than one city center. Brazil and Colombia’s urbanization processes have differed from countries like Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Venezuela, for example, because while Rio de Janeiro and Bogotá are capitals, they have had to share dominance with São Paulo and Medellín

respectively (Skidmore 142). Millions of rural workers have migrated to these metropolises where, for most, living conditions are not much better than the ones they left behind. While some are able to enter the middle class, the majority of the new urban inhabitants have built shacks in the Colombian *comunas* or Brazilian *favelas* in the unoccupied areas on the margins of the city. The continual, unregulated growth of these shantytowns has triggered an increase in social problems for residents: poverty, gangs, drugs, violence, and social exclusion are not uncommon.

Parallel to the wildfire spreading of these marginalized urban communities, Brazil and Colombia have experienced a recent surge of shantytown-themed nonfictional literature and film. In academic studies of Brazilian or Colombian cultural production, such as those by Rory O'Bryen (2008) and Stephanie Muir (2008), these nonfictional works have been largely overlooked in favor of their more popular and commercially successful fictional counterparts, for instance, the Brazilian film *Cidade de Deus* (dir. Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, 2002).

At the same time, many such studies tend to limit their scope to the literature and/or film of only one of these countries. While these approaches make valuable contributions to the discipline of Latin American Studies, they overlook an innovative cluster of recent Brazilian and Colombian nonfictional books and films which are challenging traditional notions of authorship, genre, production, marketing, and conscience-raising. These written and cinematic works speak to a wide range of urban social problems while simultaneously testifying to the economic, social, and political factors experienced by displaced, poor, rural Brazilians and Colombians during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Given that most shantytown residents are culturally, economically, and politically excluded from the means of self-representation, this category positions the shantytown resident and his/her narration as central figures in the struggle for recognition of the social problems in peripheral Latin American neighborhoods.

In Brazil and Colombia, shantytown testimonial narrative²—produced roughly from 2003 to the present—often takes the form of a written narrative or documentary film that treats the life story or life experience of a shantytown resident; this person's story is commonly marked by displacement and is representative of his or her community, or a sector of it, and the social problems that afflict it. At the same time, these nonfictional books and films distinguish themselves from their fictional counterparts in several significant ways: 1) first-hand accounts of shantytown life are presented, often word-for-word, in the street talk of residents; 2) there is a heavy involvement of shantytown dwellers in co-production and co-authorship;³ 3) sociologists or journalists, specifically *cronistas*—writers of crónicas, frequently co-author these books and films, and their research into the shantytowns is included alongside the intimate stories of residents; 4) marketing is prioritized to shantytown dwellers, other marginalized communities, as well as to an international audience; and 5) works are united both by theme—shantytown social problems—and by objective—creating a consciousness about daily shantytown struggles.

It is the third characteristic of this recent category that is the focus of this article. Testimonies are often seen as commodities that must provide practical use, and non-hybrid testimonial works are commonly unable to provide a large supply of what society often values as truthful, namely, accurate professional data. Along these same lines, while witnesses' accounts and testimonies usually tend to be condemned in cases in which they do not match evidence collected by other means, shantytown testimonial narrative solves this problem through its unified hybridity, engaging aesthetics, and multiple and authoritative perspectives. In this article, by situating shantytown testimonial narrative among a number of critical perspectives concerning co-authorship within testimonial works, I examine the unique authorship and genre-infusion within this recent category. Through this contextualization and a subsequent analysis of

two exemplary works – José Alejandro Castaño’s book *La Isla de Morgan* (2003) and José Padilha’s documentary *Ônibus 174* (2004) –, I argue that via the fusing of journalistic, such as crónica, or sociological influences, shantytown testimonial narrative puts forth esteemed professional insight along with, at times, stylistic elements intended to aestheticize the stories of shantytown dwellers and engage public consciousness. As such, shantytown⁵ testimonial narratives are a valuable means for working through traumatic memories, for conscience-raising, and for social and cultural resistance.

1 Between Interlocutor and Testimonialista: Critical Perspectives on Authorship

Throughout my examination of this genre infusion, while I indeed recognize the difference in production, meaning, and structures within film versus literature, it is through a hybrid approach of analyzing both together that I emphasize the multifaceted qualities of contemporary shantytown conditions, as well as the thematic and authorial similarities, that exist among works within this category. Thematically, the films and books of shantytown testimonial narrative speak to the urban periphery’s social problems that continue to be overlooked by both the state and general public, even when they occur in proximity to centers of political and economic power.⁴

By giving voice to the marginalized masses through personal stories, this recent category maintains roots in – yet significantly departs from – two Latin American genres popularized in the 1970s: *testimonio* and *New Latin American Cinema*.⁵ Both genres were reactions to, and documents of, the harsh regimes of the 1960s and 1970s and the related political and cultural resistance movements. They sought to portray marginalized subjects and transform reality through the critical documentation of poverty,

societal injustices, and marginality; an active audience, it should be noted, was integral to this social change.⁶ In testimonio, it was common for the interlocutor to imbue the testimonialista's narrative with ethnographic elements;⁷ such genre-infusion is illustrated in Esteban Montejo's *Biografía de un Cimarrón* and Rigoberta Menchú's *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así me Nació la Conciencia*.⁸ Authorship in New Latin American Cinema, in contrast, was more shared in the sense that the testimonialistas were also natural actors, editors, audience members, and film assistants.

While shantytown testimonial narrative differs from its parent genres in areas such as genre-infusion and thematic focus, it maintains several key characteristics of testimonio and New Latin American Cinema. Written and filmic works within this recent category, for example, involve an interlocutor who publishes and disseminates a marginal protagonist's life story or experience which is representative of the social problems of his/her larger socioeconomic group. The complexity of shantytown testimonial narrative reflects the always difficult to define nature of these two parent genres, both of which contain various sub-groups and phases. Nonetheless, written and filmic shantytown testimonial narrative is united by its aforementioned subject matter and its goals.

This recent filmic and literary category is also united by the direct presence of co-authors: the testimonialista and the sociologist or cronista. The notion of the explicitly present interlocutor, however, is in contrast with theorists of subaltern studies who argue that the very interviewer who elicits a testimony is a likely enemy because of the potential for distorting the narrator's words or intent. The subaltern perspective considers that this narrator or testimonialista is often a subaltern subject – someone denied both mimetic and political forms of representation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for example, in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", says that any outside attempt to provide subalterns with collective speech – and thus to improve the subalterns' condition – will invariably result in the problem-

atic assumption of cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people, and a reliance upon Western intellectuals to speak for the subaltern condition instead of the subalterns speaking for themselves. For Spivak, the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject will, in the long run, enmesh with the work of imperialist subject-constitution and, as a result, the subaltern subject will be as mute as ever. By the same token, another ongoing problem with representations of the subaltern in *testimonio* is that imperialism continues to establish the universality of the mode of production of narrative. Hence, while to ignore the subaltern today is to continue the imperialist project, trying to represent the subaltern or speak for the subaltern, will also continue that project.

Ultimately, in learning to speak to – rather than for – the historically muted subaltern subject, the postcolonial intellectual may systematically unlearn privilege and connect with the subaltern in a more authentic way. In a sense, though, this is in fact what sociologists and *cronistas* are attempting to do in shantytown *testimonial* narrative. Instead of dominating authorship – by, for example, choosing themes and stylizing the *testimonialista*'s speech – they are speaking alongside the subaltern subject instead of for them. By doing so, these authoritative professionals substantiate the *testimonialista*'s story and provide further insight into the presented social problems for the target audience. This strategy is effective because the audience of sociology or *crónica*-infused works is likely comprised of an educated public who would embrace a professional perspective.

Although the need for an interlocutor is indeed problematic, on his/her own, the *testimonialista* as author, and as authority, can quickly be called into question. In his essay "Testimonio and Postmodernism", George Yúdice notes that literary critics are "quick to discard the *testimonialista*'s claim to authenticity, based on the age-old literary premise that narrative voice is always a persona which does not coincide with the individual narrating" (18). And while it is easy to deconstruct the illusion

of the “real” subaltern voice in testimonial works, John Beverley, in “The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio”, says it is necessary to depend on it in order to understand these work’s power and to have the sensation of experiencing the real (31). This “truth effect”, after all, is tied to solidarity of the audience with a normally distant cause and social situation.

Another reason why more direct mediation in testimonial works is important is due to the problems of memory associated with those persons who have witnessed trauma. This is especially true of shantytown dwellers, many of whom have been raised in violent, precarious spaces and have likely witnessed violence repeatedly either during displacement and/or over the course of living in the comuna or favela. Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, in *Witness and Memory: the Discourse of Trauma* (2003), point to the widespread view that witnesses, like testimonialistas, are by definition affected by their experience. The effects of trauma are illustrated in the broken, incoherent nature of their acts of witness, which function as an authenticating sign for their testimony (11). They go on to note that over time it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between what one has actually experienced and what one has read, heard, or imagined about what happened in the past. Accordingly, in relation to testimonio, the major problem is that memory is susceptible to modification by later experience. This fact is even more the case with very traumatic events where the memory trace was compromised from the beginning in a way that capacity for observation was paralyzed by suffering and incomprehension. Within shantytown testimonial narrative, readers rely on the sociologists or cronistas for their professional, more objective accounts and their interpretation of the social problems presented by the testimonialista. In the end, sociology and crónica – with their scientific and journalistic influences respectively – serve to balance out any doubts that may arise from testimonies as a result of the aforementioned problems which originate due to the witnessing of trauma.

The direct presence of the interlocutor in shantytown testimonial narrative is, however, juxtaposed with the traditional idea about testimonial works that “the text’s authority has conventionally come to depend on three ideas: what we define as truthful, the collective representativity of the narrator, and the transcriber’s disappearance by his or her transparent intervention” (Bartow 24). I argue that in shantytown testimonial narrative this final trait applies to a significantly reduced degree. In fact, it is the opposite strategy: the direct appearance, voice, and opinions of the interlocutor – now a professional sociologist or *cronista* – that gives these testimonial works their authority and yields increased engagement with, and understanding of, the social situation, as well as greater solidarity.

Although not a wholly objective journalism, *crónica*’s power in shantytown testimonial narrative lies in the interpretive, explanatory nature of the *cronista*’s writing. According to Esperança Bielsa in *The Latin American Urban Crónica* (2006), this genre was in part influenced by North American New Journalism, and first emerged in its contemporary form at the end of the 1960s as a privileged means through which the plurality and diversity of urban life could be narrated (xii-xiii).⁹ It has since come to be known as a genre of literary journalism in which the everyday history of societies are recorded and documented (xii). Building upon this characterization, Bielsa notes that *crónica* is a genre that contains not only information, but also the author’s impressions. Additionally, she says, a *crónica* is normally “written on demand for the mass media and is subject to the technical limitations of space, language and time” (32). The authors of *crónicas* are often intellectuals who enjoy a recognized position in the field of restricted production, and they tend to confer a stylized look upon reality. Traditionally, *crónica* has been the vehicle through which they have been able to overcome the isolation of the written word, to reduce its characteristic distance from the majority of the population in Latin American societies, and to engage with large audiences (xii).

In comparison to testimonial works, one noteworthy overlap is that testimonio and *crónica* tend to be textual meeting points for high and low cultures. Bielsa notes that the *crónica*, as a literary account of city life, is an intermediate form of the contact zone between both cultures. This is also true of testimonios, a genre in which interlocutors often come from a more privileged background than the marginal testimonialistas, and they tend to disseminate testimonios of the oppressed to a public capable of producing change – the reading public that tends to be dominated by the middle and upper class.

Apart from this commonality between the two genres, it is important to note here some of the ways in which *crónica* differs from testimonial works. For example, *crónicas* usually lack a testimonialista, a subaltern subject, an authentic speech, and the prioritization of exposing social problems, because a *crónica* can encapsulate a wide variety of themes. Other important distinctions are that *crónica* “fictionalizes in varying degrees the real events it portrays, producing an ambiguity between reality and fiction” and that “*crónica* possesses a style” (Bielsa 39). While this fictionalization is present to a certain extent in testimonios, since memory inherently contains aspects of fictionalization and interpretation, it is by no means an intrinsic part of testimonios. Shantytown testimonial narrative is unique because the potential fictional narrative aspects of the *cronistas*’ texts are balanced by the unadorned testimonies of the subjects. At the same time, the problematic memory associated with first-hand accounts of testimonialistas is ideally remedied by the more objective and more professional, if stylized, journalistic writing of the *cronista*. There is hence a mixture of self-represented witnessing and intentionally interpretive narration, and readers thus receive a multifaceted, multi-perspective text.

In light of the common fusion of testimonio and journalism within shantytown testimonial narrative, I asked award-winning Colombian *cronista* Alberto Salcedo Ramos why Colombian testimonial works are

so commonly infused with *crónica*. He explained that “la *crónica* es una forma de construir memoria. En Colombia como tenemos una realidad tan compleja, tan llena de problemas, me parece que el periodismo de denuncia es tal vez lo que la sociedad requiere con mayor urgencia”. [“*crónica* is a way of constructing memory. In Colombia, since we have such a complex reality that is so full of problems, it seems to me that a denunciatory journalism is perhaps what society so urgently needs”] (Salcedo Ramos).¹⁰ But while Salcedo Ramos ultimately categorizes this fusion of testimonio and *crónica* as journalism, for me it is shantytown testimonial narrative because it denounces comuna social problems not just in the words of an authoritative professional author, but also in the very popular lexicon of the residents living in the comuna. This co-authorship – intimate stories accompanied by interpretive, descriptive journalism, or rather the personal and the collective as substantiated by a professional perspective – ideally awakens the reading public that is otherwise sits isolated from the informants’ experience (Bartow 25).

2 Hybrid perspectives: a critical analysis of authorship and genre-infusion in two examples of shantytown testimonial narrative

One exemplary, *crónica*-infused work within shantytown testimonial narrative is José Alejandro Castaño’s *La Isla de Morgan*, published in Colombia in 2003. *La Isla de Morgan* is the result of Castaño’s effort to investigate one of the worst shantytowns in Medellín – in terms of, for instance, the extent of drug addiction, poverty, and lack of sanitation and social organizations. In his publication, Castaño has a strong narratorial presence which is included alongside the quotes and testimonies of shantytown residents. As in most *crónicas*, Castaño employs simple, direct, but often descriptive, language that at times is very personal. Despite such intimate narration, the intrinsically journalistic nature of the *crónica* offers

this shantytown testimonial work a more highly regarded type of witnessing – that which is unaffected by trauma.

Castañó has been very vocal about the value of fusing *crónica* with *testimonio*. Within such texts, he says that *cronistas* should not only tell the story, but also decipher why the story occurred. This aspect is very different from *testimonio* and New Latin American Cinema in the sense that it underscores the authoritative, professional presence of the interlocutor. In *La Isla de Morgan*, Castañó focuses his investigation on a building, which along with other nearby abandoned structures used in a similar fashion, is known as “Las Cuevas.” He writes:

Un viejo caserón... quedó vacío, y los vendedores de marihuana y basuco, que ya habían logrado consolidar un territorio propio en la geografía del barrio, lo reclamaron como suyo. Los mendigos descubrieron allí un paraíso seguro y seco que burlaba... el frío, un hotel cuya única tarifa era consumir droga.

[A big old house... remained empty, and the marijuana and crack cocaine peddlers, that had already succeeded in consolidating their own territory in the geography of the neighborhood, claimed it as their own. The beggars discovered a safe and dry paradise there that evaded...the cold, a hotel whose only tariff was to use drugs.] (14)

At Las Cuevas, Castañó notes, “Los drogadictos iban y venían y los extremos encendidos de los cigarros que fumaban eran punticos rojos flotando en la oscuridad. Parecían luciérnagas. Había cientos de ellas. Me sentí como en una proyección en un planetario” [“The drug addicts came and went and the lit ends of the cigarettes that they smoked were small red dots floating in the darkness. They looked like fireflies. There were hundreds of them. It felt like a show in a planetarium”] (18). Castañó’s description of this drug-filled space is, as one would be hard-pressed to deny, rather lovely. However, Joanne Bartow, in *Subject to Change: The Lessons of Latin American Women’s Testimonio for Truth, Fiction, and Theory* (2005), discusses the potential problems associated with stylizing such a dire social situation; she points to the “aesthetic concerns associated with fiction,

with literature, [that] have seemed inappropriate to mix with the urgency of authorizing the reality and truth of marginalized accounts denied by official history” (20). In spite of the delicate balance between aesthetics and acute social problems, it is Castaño’s beautiful, vivid description of the poverty and drug-use he sees that make his depictions of Las Cuevas so shocking, impactful, and absorbing to the point that, as we will see, the public demands a response from the mayor of Medellín.

Such aestheticization of urgent social problems is reminiscent of the debate in New Latin American Cinema over depictions of violence and misery in film. Within that debate, Castaño would likely find himself aligned with New Latin American Cinema filmmaker Jorge Sanjinés who argued that a revolutionary art of the marginalized and their social problems must seek beauty not as an end but as a means because without this inter-relation, we are left with a mere pamphlet (Sanjinés 34). Indeed, without Castaño’s stylized description, the readers have a dry, non-engaging portrait of the everyday cityscape that is all too commonly ignored.

Castaño’s aestheticization emphatically lures us in and engages us with this distant underworld, only for us to be met by more shocking and hidden features of the shantytown. In particular, perhaps the most upsetting aspect of *La Isla de Morgan* is the account of abandoned children and street kids: “Muchos – entonces me pareció increíble – no recordaban sus nombres, apenas los apodos; tampoco el lugar de donde venían ni la edad. El sufrimiento era un vestido diario que, semejante a la mugre y al hambre, enseñaban con naturalidad y mansedumbre” [“Many – it seemed incredible to me – did not remember their names, just their nicknames; neither the place where they came from nor their age. Suffering was a daily outfit that, similar to filth and hunger, they displayed with naturalness and meekness”] (20). As someone who himself grew up in a violent Medellín shantytown, Castaño’s shock, horror, and intolerance towards La isla de Morgan makes all the more of an impact on the reader. The resulting grav-

ity of Castaño's reaction is reflected in the public response to his crónicas about the shantytown. Less than 24 hours after their initial publication in a Medellín newspaper, the mayor was bombarded by calls from local residents who pressured him to do something about the situation of the shantytown. The mayor responded by sending a letter to the newspaper, which mandated that Las Cuevas should be vacated and be destroyed.

Ultimately, Castaño's work was a catalyst for a societal reaction, though it did not produce the expected effect of finding ways to solve structural problems in society. The mayor's response, in fact, is a disadvantage, an unintended back-firing to residents who are further victimized (unwittingly) by the publications of interlocutors. The reactions triggered by Castaño's crónica consequently illustrate the power and authority that cronistas bestow upon a testimonial work. Indeed, if the story of Las Cuevas and the residents of La isla de Morgan had been published on its own as a testimonio, it is difficult to imagine that – without Castaño's vivid description and interpretative narration – it would have generated a similar response. At the same time, the public reaction – suggesting that destroying the place would resolve the problem – typifies the middle and upper class attitude of “out of sight out of mind.”

La Isla de Morgan ultimately highlights the type of outcome that can realistically be yielded through shantytown testimonial works. While such texts are able to raise awareness about a social problem among an audience that is physically and intellectually removed from these urban spaces, such an upper class public – while likely able to instigate the necessary structural changes that the shantytowns could benefit from – is perhaps more likely to bury the problem under the ruins of its own physical obliteration; with this “quick and dirty” solution, the seeds of the social problems remain as pervasive as ever.

As revealing as *La Isla de Morgan* is about the outcomes of shantytown testimonial narrative, so it is, too, about authorship of these hybrid

works. Castaño walks a fine line, for instance, between being an insider and outsider of the comuna, and both his book and newspaper crónicas ultimately reveal the problematic authorship issues intrinsic to all types of testimonial works. One comuna resident, for example, tells him: “Periodista, usted hizo un buen trabajo. Pusimos a la gente a hablar. Antes nadie sabía de las jodidas Cuevas, ahora todo el mundo habla del tema. Ganamos. Váyase a dormir” [“Journalist, you did a good job. You made the people talk. Before nobody knew of the screwed up Cuevas, now the whole world is talking about it. We won. Now go to sleep”] (68). But in the end, Castaño, for better or worse, is responsible for the casting out of scores of people from Las Cuevas, and these people are left with nowhere to go. The havoc wrecked by Castaño through his publication thus illustrates a fulfillment of Spivak’s indicated prophecy that by granting subalterns – here, the residents of the comuna – collective speech, they will be as mute as ever. Through the imperialist destruction of Las Cuevas, the problems and people of La isla de Morgan will likely be forgotten, and the imperialist project will prevail.

In accordance with the upshot of Castaño’s publication, while in the first half of *La Isla de Morgan* he focuses the text on exposing the unknown world of Las Cuevas and the shantytown at large, in the second half we follow him as a central character who must deal with his culpability. Castaño repeatedly expresses his guilt for single-handedly causing the eviction of so many comuna residents, but what seems to annoy him just as much are the accusations that he resembles the type of exploitative journalists whom he hates. One resident tells him: “La miseria y todas las pestes de la ruina humana los atraen a ustedes [los periodistas] igual que el vómito de un borracho atrae a las moscas” [“Misery and all the pests of human ruin attract you [journalists] just like a drunk’s vomit attracts flies”] (48). This characterization of misery-hunting journalists is, ironically, precisely what Castaño aimed to work against, and it is why he chose

crónica as his preferred genre. Castaño has openly criticized mainstream journalists, specifically in Colombia, for converting human drama into a garbage dump; they all, he says, extract the worse from each story. Instead, Castaño suggests trying to find the real human stories behind the pain and suffering because each story, after all, has something to teach us, a key which will help us to become better citizens and a better society. Despite his intended goals through this hybrid text, Castaño arguably did not succeed in producing the type of change for which testimonial works are made.

Castaño's aestheticization of urgent social problems, coupled with his shock at the comuna conditions despite being from a shantytown, do produce a text that succeeds in stirring the public and raising consciousness. Nevertheless, facts show in this case that it was a fleeting awareness because the mayor had already forgotten his promises to clean up La isla de Morgan a mere nine weeks later. The rapid public reaction and almost equally speedy loss of interest in Las Cuevas leads one to ask what effect crónicas or testimonios can truly have on the public, and whether, perhaps, testimonial film is a more powerful artistic medium for affecting social change because it can reach a wider audience, and not just the upper-class dominated reading public. By reaching a wider audience that includes the subjects of the testimonial work and other marginalized groups like them, the subaltern protagonists may have greater possibility to affect change concerning the social problems presented. But with regards to affecting social change, Castaño defends himself by telling a comuna resident in *La Isla de Morgan*: "Yo no escribo para cambiar el mundo, trato de ser consecuente. Si el Municipio prometió unas cosas, pues que las cumpla, no es más!" ["I don't write in order to change the world, I try to be consistent. If the Municipality promises things, then they should fulfill them, that's it!"] (69). The man, however, reminds him: "¡A punta de crónicas y de libros no se cambia el mundo! No se exija tanto!" ["The world isn't changed through crónicas and books! Don't demand so much!"] (69).

Maybe he cannot change the world, but at the very least Castaño's hybrid text succeeds in engaging readers with an unknown shantytown space while simultaneously humanizing its populace who are all too often considered disposable "members" of society.

The mixture of testimonios with an authoritative voice, such as that of the *cronista*, is also a reoccurring presence within Brazilian shantytown testimonial narrative. One recent work which touches on this fusion of insider and outsider perspectives about the shantytowns is Bryan McCann's "The Political Evolution of Rio de Janeiro's Favelas: Recent Works" (2006). McCann specifically discusses favela-themed texts with a focus on who is producing them. He notes that social scientists have served as some of the foremost intermediaries between "favela" and "cidade," between the masses of squatter settlements and the institutions of political power and cultural capital in the formal, official metropolis. McCann observes that until recently, such traffic remained heavily unidirectional, as university researchers entered favelas and reported back to the wider world in sociological reports. The slow, but significant expansion of the population of university students hailing from the favelas and the far more rapid growth of nongovernmental organizations cultivating local agents trained in social scientific methods have begun to change this pattern. Partly as a result, recent studies and reports have reached new levels of density, combining "native" and "foreign" viewpoints to offer a richer understanding of the changing problems of these neighborhoods (McCann 150). Such co-authorship is precisely what is occurring in shantytown testimonial narrative, although the pattern that McCann observes, I would argue, is part of the larger filmic and literary boom that I point to in both Brazil and Colombia.

Within shantytown testimonial narrative, instead of the *crónica*-infusion seen in Colombia, the Brazilian works more commonly employ the influence of urban sociology – the study of social life and human

interaction in metropolitan areas. Urban sociology seeks to study the structures, processes, changes and problems of an urban area and by so doing, provides input for policy making. Statistics, observation, and interviews are commonly used. Like cronistas, urban sociologists add a more creditable element to the shantytown resident's unadorned testimonies, although sociology often mediates these testimonies through the dominant empirical discourse of science. Within Brazilian shantytown testimonial films in particular, the traditional, authoritative voice-over narration in documentary is now replaced by interviews with sociologists who interpret the testimonios of shantytown residents and then offer recommendations for ameliorating the presented social problems.

With its directly filmed interviews with favelados and street kids and its heavy infusion of sociology, Jose Padilha's documentary *Ônibus 174* is both an exemplary and a non-traditional shantytown testimonial narrative. Indeed, Padilha's methodology and goals are very much in line with the other shantytown testimonial works, but the subject matter of *Ônibus 174* is broader and more multi-faceted. While the main action of this film does not take place in the favela, all of the marginal subjects presented were born in favelas, and the great majority of social problems depicted are directly tied to those in the favelas. At the same time, Padilha tries, through this film, to go against an official, one-sided, and poorly understood version of events. The fact that we are hearing an unofficial story by marginal protagonists as well as interpretation and insight by sociologists ultimately situates this documentary well within the category of shantytown testimonial narrative.

In *Ônibus 174*, Padilha details the life of Sandro, a former street boy who, by hijacking a local bus in Rio de Janeiro in 2000, attacks the society that robbed him of what little he possessed: his mother, who was slain in front of him when he was six years old; members of his gamin family, who were murdered by police while they were sleeping; and, finally, his

youth, which was annihilated in the juvenile detention center to which he was sent. *Ônibus 174* clearly presents such state-sponsored subjugation as the justified stimulus for Sandro's nationally televised act of terror. In an explanation of why he made *Ônibus 174*, Padilha says that after reading the Rio newspapers days after the hijacking, he found almost no information on Sandro, and instead the focus of most of the articles was on the related police work. This goes to show how the "official story" often turns its focus completely away from the marginalized, and there is thus a need for testimonial works that offer the perspective of the subaltern. Through his film, Padilha not only aimed to go against the official, incomplete account of the hijacking, but also, as in other shantytown testimonial narratives, to show Sandro's human side. This aspect is clear through the portrayal of Sandro as a victim of society, through his tender relationship with his adoptive mother, and finally through Sandro's own behavior broadcast on live television.

In terms of genre influence, there are several interviews with renowned sociologist Luis Eduardo Soares. With great conviction and passion, Soares attempts to explain Sandro's actions in the following way:

This Sandro is an example of the invisible kids who confront us with their violence, which is nothing but a desperate and impotent cry. They do it because we fail to deal with social exclusion, racism, and other kinds of stigmatization. People eventually learn to coexist with the Sandros... All this has been converted to part of our daily experience. These boys battle against invisibility. We are nothing if someone doesn't look at us, doesn't acknowledge our worth, doesn't tell us we have some importance... At the point Sandro got in front of the TV cameras, he imposed his visibility. He was the main character in a new narrative. He redefined the social narrative. The story that placed him in a subordinate position was suddenly converted into a tale where he had the leading role... A boy with a gun can make us feel something, a negative feeling, but a feeling. He can recover his visibility and affirm his social and human existence. It is a process of self-construction, self-invention mediated by violence.¹¹ (*Ônibus 174*)

Soares points to Sandro as a collective voice representing countless other street kids like him; here, an individual voice becomes a communal one. Padilha echoes this notion by saying that “if one understands the causes of violence in Sandro’s case, one will be able to generalize for Brazil society as whole”, because many are treated with violence like him (*Ônibus 174*). This universality is another reason why Padilha wanted to make the film, and it is why he used so many aerial shots of the city throughout it, so that he could visually make this generalization. During these aerial shots of sunny, colorful Rio, very somber music is playing which serves to remind us of the tragic subculture of street children and violence that looms behind this city with such a festive reputation.

In addition to the “personal is political” element of the documentary that is represented by Sandro’s universality, various testimonies are presented from an impressively diverse range of people involved in the hijacking. This multi-perspective nature, with notably conflicting viewpoints, hearkens back to shantytown testimonial narrative’s roots and specifically to the testimonio *La Noche de Tlatelolco* by Elena Poniatowska. Padilha, for instance, combines media footage – photographs and television coverage reminiscent of the then-innovative newspaper excerpts in *Tlatelolco* – plus, like Poniatowska’s text, accounts from all actors involved in the incident; now, however, the new protagonist is the sociologist, but there remains a journalistic tie to the crónica-infused texts of Colombian shantytown testimonial narrative. Padilha’s interest in showing different viewpoints related to a single phenomenon, for instance, is very characteristic of journalistic work. In fact, one of the supposed doctrinal backbones of journalism is to contrast different perspective in relation to a fact. Padilha’s provides polyphony in film through various interviews with police officers, a Rio Swat team negotiator, a newspaper reporter, hostages, and friends and family of Sandro. He also makes use of archival footage from the event as well as interviews which are intermixed with what was aired on television on the day of the hijacking.

The interviews with hostages are a specific reminder – given the character of the hijacking – of problematic witnessing and memory in the face of a trauma, issues which are raised by Vogler and Douglass in *Witness and Memory*. But instead of traumatized memory, Padilha explains that the greatest challenge was the fact that all of the hostages had been interviewed many times before and they had consequently developed automatic answers to questions about the incident. In order to get more raw accounts from them, Padilha showed the hostages images from the hijacking; the hostages would control the projector and stop it whenever they felt like it, and Padilha would then interview them right after. The result was that they remembered new aspects of the event with greater detail.

If we think back to one of shantytown testimonial narrative's primary influences, New Latin American Cinema, the infusion of other genres was neither very common nor was it necessarily looked down upon. Marta Rodríguez, an anthropologist and New Latin American Cinema filmmaker, for instance, said:

When you combine social science with mass medium like film, you are challenging the uses to which both are put by the privileged classes. In contrast to the kind of hermetic treatise that only five initiates can read, this is a way to use anthropology or sociology so that the working class can put it to use analyzing their particular situation. (Burton 31)

While Rodríguez is a trained anthropologist, the influence of this social science in her films, such as *Chircales* and *Amor, Mujeres, y Flores*, is significantly more subtle when compared to the direct extent that sociology is present in shantytown testimonial narrative.

Another distinction is that while New Latin American Cinema films were targeted for marginal audiences, shantytown testimonial films are commonly screened for both a local and international public. Accordingly, instead of genre amalgamation, New Latin American Cinema filmmakers tended to focus on the participation of the masses in various

aspects of film production; “the people” were co-authors, natural actors, co-producers, co-editors, and the ideal audience.¹² To the extent that filmic shantytown testimonial narrative, like many New Latin American Cinema films, uses directly filmed interviews and at times voice-over narrations by the marginal protagonists, there remains, to a degree, shared authorship.

Within *Ônibus 174*, perhaps the most powerful – and most haunting – *testimonio* in the film comes from the now-dead protagonist himself. Padilha uses much of the live television footage in which Sandro speaks to cops and to the public. At one point, Sandro takes off the towel from his face and holds a female hostage with a gun out of the window; he says:

Check this out everybody, the same way you are mean, I’m not messing around either... Stare at my face! Take a good look! ...Fifteen years ago they tore my mother’s head off. I just got out of jail and have nothing to lose... Hear what I say? ...This ain’t no action movie. This is serious shit, bro! No use in terrorizing me. Didn’t you terrorize me when you could? Haven’t you slaughtered those people in Vigario? Didn’t you kill my friends at Candelaria? I was there. Weren’t you? Ask Aunt Yvonne. (*Ônibus 174*)

Yvonne Bezerra is a social worker who had known Sandro during his childhood and adolescence. In his speech to police, Sandro points to her as an authority who can back up his claims. In fact, she, along with Soares, is precisely the type of professional authoritative voice that, as Sandro himself recognizes, corroborates the words of marginal testimonialistas like himself; Sandro indeed recognizes that Yvonne’s words are more valuable than his own.

In her own interviews, Yvonne describes Sandro as an introvert with severe learning problems. She has tears in her eyes when talking about him, and their relationship over the years, and she portrays him in the tenderest of lights as a victim who did not get the educational and familial attention he so desperately needed. In broader terms, she talks about what became of the rest of Sandro’s gamin family that survived Candelaria. Seven

of 62 street kids were killed at Candelaria. Yvonne recently concluded a study on their fates and found that 39 were murdered, several disappeared, and some have managed to survive precariously. In her interview she additionally recalls that a radio station did a survey about the incident and most people said that the massacre was a good thing – that these youths should be killed and the city should be cleaned up. *Ônibus 174* is an attempt to humanize these street kids. While in the interview Padilha recognizes that violence has many causes such as, he says, foreign debts, education, police pay and training, he believes that films like his own can help bring awareness and put pressure on authorities to bring about change.

Compared to *La Isla de Morgan*, it is more difficult to determine what effects *Ônibus 174* has had on the public. Still, one would be hard-pressed to deny that the documentary had a positive impact, albeit an indirect one. In his article “Blame it on Rio,” for instance, David Ng notes that *Ônibus 174* had great critical and popular success in Brazil, and he asks Padilha if he thinks that the public has a need to collectively re-experience traumatic events in order to understand them. Padilha responds:

I don't feel that it was a question of the city needing to relive the event. I felt like it would actually have been forgotten because you have so many violent events like that in the city... I met the mayor once and I asked him, “Don't you think this movie is bad for tourism?” He said it's bad for tourism if you pretend it's not there. You have to be open about what's going on and face the problems... (Ng n. pag.)

Ônibus 174, and shantytown testimonial narrative in general, thus exhibits its value through the creation of a permanent record of unofficial history.

While the social impact of shantytown testimonial narrative cannot be easily measured, it gives voice to the urban marginalized through the synergetic relation between authorities and testimonialistas. In view of that, solidarity between the audience and shantytown protagonist is contingent upon authorial decisions of the interlocutor who interprets

the raw language of the testimonialista according to a scientific or journalistic gaze. As sociologists approximate an unbiased perspective in their co-authorship of shantytown testimonial narratives and as cronistas lure readers in with captivating descriptions, the public receives a balanced, multi-faceted, and aesthetically engaging version of shantytown social problems. Such co-authorship by sociologists and cronistas counters the testimonialistas' trauma by adding professional insight that is likely desired by the target audience; authority and aesthetics, in the end, connect the shantytown residents' story and social problems with an audience that is removed – both literally and figuratively – from the urban periphery. As such, shantytown testimonial narrative functions not only as evidence of the past, but also as a different way to live now through a more comprehensive understanding of social problems and public connection with a normally distant shantytown universe.

NOTES

¹ With the term “displacement”, I refer to forced migration – the coerced movement of a person or persons away from their home or home region often through violent means.

² I include the word “testimonial” within this category in order to distinguish it from other nonfiction that is more scientific and less personal, and to connote that the narratives are largely told in the words of the marginalized protagonists themselves. Since this article is written in English, I refer to the coined category with its English name – shantytown testimonial narrative, but it is important to note the category's Spanish-language and Portuguese-language labels: respectively, *testimonio de la periferia urbana* and *depoimento da periferia urbana*.

³ The protagonists of one exemplary shantytown testimonial narrative, Matt Mochary and Jeff Zimbalist's documentary *Favela Rising* (2007), served as co-editors of the film.

⁴ While the social problems of shantytowns are seldom clearly defined, either in terms of chronology or statistics, it should be noted that recent improvements have undoubtedly been made in both the comunas of Medellín and the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. In Medellín, for instance, social exclusion has eased due to the development of transport infrastructure, but the problems of gangs, drugs, violence, and social marginalization persist. In particular, gang violence is still prevalent within the comunas, and displacement – due to threats and violence from guerilla groups, such as FARC and the ELN, as well as the paramilitaries – continues to produce a constant flow of new migrants who are forced to settle within the often inhospitable urban periphery (Kimmelman n. pag.). In Brazil, similar progress has recently been made to Rio's favelas in an effort to clean up the city's image in time for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympic Games (which will both take place there).

But displacement – due to land ownership issues and the severe poverty of the northeast – continues to create a surge of new favela inhabitants, many of whom are cut off from basic social services and infrastructure. As a result, although the improvements of Brazil and Colombia's urban periphery are noteworthy, social problems continue to prevail for residents of these still marginalized communities.

⁵ John Beverley, in "The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio" – an essay included in *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (2004) –, defines testimonio as: "a novel or novella length narrative in a book or pamphlet form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts" (30-31). Beverley maintains that the narrator of testimonio is usually someone either illiterate or at least not a professional writer, and that this person often needs an interlocutor of a more privileged background in order to elicit his or her story (32). In accordance with the marginality of the testimonialista, testimonio is concerned with a problematic social situation, and the situation of the narrator is representative of a larger social class.

New Latin American Cinema was a reaction to the harsh regimes of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as to the legacy of centuries of colonialism and imperialism. It was a movement that produced documentary or documentary-inflected films from the perspective of the marginalized, and it went against state, official discourse. New Latin American Cinema was concerned with political action and choice, and its films were thought to have a catalytic role in the aim to overcome imperialism.

⁶ With regards to an active audience, New Latin American Cinema filmmaker Tomas Gutiérrez Alea distinguished between two types of spectators: 1) the contemplative spectator who does not move beyond the passive, contemplative level, and 2) the active spectator who takes a moment of live contemplation to critically understand reality and then to transform it into action.

⁷ Interlocutor is a term used to refer to the person who elicits or collects the testimony or interview that is the basis of the testimonial work. This person also organizes and edits the testimonial work and is a more comprehensive understanding of social problems and public connection with a normally distant shantytown universe, responsible for its production, publication, and dissemination. Oftentimes the interlocutor comes from a more privileged socioeconomic background than the testimonialista, and he or she tends to be credited as either editor or co-author of the testimonial work. Testimonialista is the term used for the marginal protagonist of a testimonial work.

⁸ Elzbieta Sklodowska accordingly maintains in *Testimonio Hispanoamericano* (1992) that early testimonios were often subject to the manipulation of conventions of traditional ethnographic discourse by compilers such as Miguel Barnet and Elizabeth Burgos in *Biografía de un Cimarrón* (1966) and *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así me Nació la Conciencia* (1983) respectively (Sklodowska 58).

⁹ New Journalism is a style of 1960s and 1970s news writing and journalism which used techniques borrowed from literary fiction such as conversation speech, point of view, and recording everyday details.

¹⁰ All translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

¹¹ All English translations from *Ônibus 174* come from the documentary's subtitles.

¹² This prioritization was in direct opposition to the historical notion of auteurism in film – a credit traditionally bestowed upon the director.

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