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# Campobello's *Cartuchos* and Cisneros's *Molotovs*: Transborder Revolutionary Feminist Narratives

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GENEVA M. GANO

Activist, writer, editor, and educator Rita Sanchez's widely anthologized essay on Chicana feminism, "Chicana Writer Breaking Out of Silence," opens with what we should think of as an astounding claim: "The Chicana writer, by the fact that she is even writing in today's society, is making a revolutionary act."<sup>1</sup> This is quite an assertion, even if we have become accustomed to platitudes that tell us that the pen is the sword. Surely, writing is not revolution, no more than words are bullets or a story is a Molotov.<sup>2</sup> Yet Sanchez insists on this analogy, repeating the words "revolution" and "revolutionary" in her short piece. We might be tempted to dismiss this claim as a routine rhetorical appeal to third world liberation movements: after all, similar claims to revolutionary acts—loaded claims that insist on sudden, violent political and social change—are ubiquitous in the 1970s.<sup>3</sup> Such a banalization of the term "revolution" indicates that it, like any writing, can be personal or private: it need not bring about massive change on a broad social and political scale. If the end goal, massive change, becomes lost, "revolutionary style" alone can come (indeed, *has* come) to suffice for radicalism.

Nonetheless, the assertion made by Sandra Cisneros, a MacArthur "Genius Grant" recipient, that the writing of *The House on Mango Street* (1984) was, for her, like "tossing a Molotov," remains particularly jolting.<sup>4</sup> More pointedly than the average "revolutionary" might, Cisneros characterizes her own writing as crude, anarchistic, desperate, and violent. The style and subject matter of *Mango Street*, however, hardly seems appropriately "revolutionary": how can a book of "cuentitos" (so styled by the author herself), marketed toward young adults and hailed for its "simplicity," possibly be considered—as Cisneros seems to suggest—an act of literary terrorism?<sup>5</sup> To ask this

is to press Sanchez's assertion that, for a Chicana, "even writing," which is to say merely writing, "in today's society is a revolutionary act." Is this true even when the subject matter is childish, seemingly apolitical, and discernibly "revolutionary" to only a scant proportion of its very large audience?<sup>6</sup> Cisneros's equation of story and Molotov forces a reconsideration of the very concept of "revolutionary writing": Cisneros not only provokes one to gauge whether the writing she produces is sufficiently revolutionary in terms of style and subject, but also whether a writer, having chosen the pen instead of the sword, can lay rightful claim to the role of the revolutionary actor under any circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

This is to think generally about revolutionary writing. More concretely, I want to ask a version of an older question: how a Chicana, supposedly "submissive, unworldly, and chaste," might imagine herself as an actor on the world stage, in the public sphere—in other words, as a revolutionary at all?<sup>8</sup> Is it fundamentally absurd to think of Cisneros, a writer, as she has characterized herself: a latter-day "Pancha Villa"?<sup>9</sup> In *The House on Mango Street*, I read the story of daily life in a Chicago barrio, narrated by the young American-Mexican girl, Esperanza, as essentially informed by a tradition of revolutionary female storytelling that transcends Anglo-American literary tradition to return us to one of the most distinctive narratives of the Mexican Revolution, Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho: relatos de la lucha en el norte de México* (1931). In formally alluding to *Cartucho*, Cisneros asks readers to reconsider *Mango Street* from a hemispheric perspective. This resituates the text within a broader Latino tradition of the *testimonio*, a genre that demands recognition of its sociopolitical significance. Moreover, by forcing a connection between the violent spaces of the post-WWII barrio and revolutionary Durango, Cisneros collapses national and temporal distinctions that would assure US readers (Cisneros's main audience) that poverty, violence, and political revolution cannot happen here. To my mind, Cisneros's radical use of form threatens not just literary conventions—this is not simply an assertion of "revolutionary style"—but also brings forward the more material threat that the barrio is a potential site of revolution, complete with violent acts.<sup>10</sup> Cisneros's kindling world, significantly, is comprised largely of women and children who are inundated with daily episodes of violence; these individuals, often dismissed as political actors, are transformed in Cisneros's work into the inheritors of a Mexican revolutionary tradition. Ultimately, I seek to assemble a border-crossing, century-spanning, linguistic barrier-quashing sense of the meaning of an unfinished (but transforming) revolution that attends to its social, cultural, and literary context.

The similarities between *Cartucho* and *Mango Street* are quite striking, despite their very different contexts of literary production: *Mango Street* within a contemporary US literary market that had begun, by 1984, to take notice of writings by women of color, and *Cartucho*, on the margins of a Revolution-era Mexican one that was largely closed to women of all backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> Most strikingly, the protagonists of *Mango Street* and *Cartucho* are both adolescent girls, marginalized within their communities and largely restricted to the confines of the domestic sphere.

Accordingly, these works are set within the very circumscribed spaces in which their protagonists are permitted to move: their immediate neighborhoods, among family and friends. Their stories are modest, private, quiet vignettes, written in a retrospective first-person perspective. They expose—but do not explicitly address—the significance of the social and political dramas that unfold around them.<sup>12</sup> Their stories, then, are minor ones that, along the lines of Deleuze and Guattari's formulation, vibrate with the girls' sensations of their own inconsequentiality within the larger culture: they comprise two of the "small voice[s] of history."<sup>13</sup> Significantly, it is in formal terms that these works announce their pointedly public meanings: they are documents of witness, *testimonios* within the cross-border tradition that implicates their female protagonists squarely within momentous political and social events.<sup>14</sup>

Most broadly, the term *testimonio*, like that of the English testimony, refers to speech acts that are embedded primarily in the extraliterary contexts of religious or legal discourse. That is, even when contestatory in nature, these have customarily been available only to those who have some access to public discourse and the channels of power: primarily men of wealth or influence.<sup>15</sup> As a literary genre, however, the *testimonio* is associated much more narrowly with post-WWII Marxist revolutions in Latin America, including the Guatemalan civil war described in the genre's exemplary text, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983). US scholars and activists became particularly interested in the *testimonio* during this period, at the same time that US feminists were becoming increasingly aware of the struggles of third world women: within this context, the *testimonio* was commonly aligned not only with political subalterns (including ethnic minorities and the poor) but with minority voices in general and women's voices in particular.<sup>16</sup> Some of the distinctive features of the genre include its first-person narration, its connection to a significant real-world event or experience, and the protagonist's role in that event as both storyteller and witness. According to John Beverley, one of the genre's most sophisticated theorists, "the situation of narration in *testimonio* has to involve an urgency to communicate a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on."<sup>17</sup> When understood as engaging with the literary genre and literary-historical context of the *testimonio*, *Mango Street* and *Cartucho* can be seen to pointedly insert their young female protagonists into the violent and bloody scenes of history from which they might otherwise be excluded as legitimate actors and participants.

As Beverley and others observe, the civil wars that raged throughout Latin America after midcentury that gave rise to the *testimonio* as a form of radical utterance were historically and geographically specific. While the long Mexican Revolution that provides the compelling action and background for *Cartucho* is not commensurate with these later events, looking at their literary products together brings to the fore important connections between them. As Max Parra has discussed more fully, Campobello's writings not only argue against the contemporary vilification of Pancho Villa, *Cartucho's* distant hero, but also—especially in the expanded 1940 edition of the

book—give voice to the collective struggles and experiences of Northern Mexicans, combatants and noncombatants alike.<sup>18</sup> For these reasons, and because the text's narrator serves as both a minor participant in and witness to the Revolution, *Cartucho* may, as Doris Meyer has proposed, be productively read and understood within the *testimonio* tradition.<sup>19</sup> My discussion of *Cartucho* supports this reading, furthering it to suggest ways in which some of the most distinctive formal elements of the text—including the unassuming child's voice and consciousness that unify the stories or *estampas*, the text's distinctive silences and abbreviations, the ethnographic insistence on recording the common voices of the diverse group of revolutionaries, and the text's remarkably impressionistic yet jarring imagery—point the way forward for the development of an explicitly transborder feminist testimonial tradition.<sup>20</sup>

Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* may also be productively read within this expanded testimonial tradition for a number of reasons. First and foremost, we can recognize the book's young female protagonist as fulfilling the primary role of the narrator of the *testimonio*: she bears witness to the struggles of a poor, working-class barrio in Chicago. Second, we can acknowledge that *Mango Street*'s narrative structure, like that of *Cartucho*, is comprised of a series of impressionistic stories that are unevenly connected to the narrator's own, but when considered together communicate the political and social oppression facing her community. Finally, drawing on critical writing about *testimonios* in general and the specific narrative strategies employed in *Cartucho*, we can understand how the strategic silences deployed throughout *Mango Street* work to express the narrator's understanding of her own fundamental exclusion from the hegemonic social and political spheres: while her stories obviously comment on these issues, as a speaking subaltern (if indeed such a thing is possible) her voice registers her sense of disempowerment and only provisionally—and somewhat unconvincingly—conceives of the potential for change.<sup>21</sup> By shifting our emphasis of interpretation away from the Western traditions of the *bildungsroman* or *künstlerroman*, which would focus the reader's attention on Esperanza's individual story of growth, reconsidering its ties to the *testimonio* allows us to acknowledge the book's larger social and political message and indeed, perhaps, feel impelled to heed its explicit call to action and change (“Who's going to do it?” asks Esperanza in one of the final stories<sup>22</sup>). By bringing together these two texts in a comparative fashion, I hope to provoke literary-critical questions about genre, such as whether a *testimonio* can be produced within and for a first world audience, but also the larger question of whether the *testimonio* bears the same urgency and significance if it is characterized as (autobiographical) fiction, as both of these texts have been.<sup>23</sup> Pointedly, I wonder whether, and under what conditions, a US audience can recognize Esperanza's story—and those of her similarly marginalized neighbors—as revolutionary. Without explaining Campobello's relationship to Cisneros in terms of direct influence, I instead think of Campobello's explicitly Revolutionary text as an integral component of the formal and ideological legacy on which Cisneros draws. Ultimately, I hope to show that Cisneros's deceptively simple narrative style and

structure have serious, pressing political and social valences. This is to explicitly position the later text in particular against the ways in which it has long been read, as a children's book that does not merit deep and thoughtful attention from a sophisticated reader. Examining these formal choices provides the foundation for a deeper understanding of both texts and, more precisely, the basis of *The House on Mango Street* in what Ramón Saldívar and Paula Moya call the “trans-American imaginary.”<sup>24</sup>

The specific cultural context connecting *Cartucho* and *Mango Street* is the US Chicano movement. While it may seem obvious to affirm that the Mexican Revolution provided significant inspiration to the development of Chicano thought and praxis, it is not entirely clear what such an inspiration meant.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, the Revolution and its “pantheon of heroes” can be broadly discerned in both the ideology and formal gestures of Chicanismo: César Chávez's *Plan of Delano* draws directly on Emiliano Zapata's “Plan de Ayala”; Chicano agitprop in the visual arts nods to the ubiquitous revolutionary images of José Guadalupe Posada; and Rodolfo “Corky” González's “Yo Soy Joaquín,” the movement's “collective song,” calls on the Revolution-era *indigenismo* that elevated the pre-Columbian Aztecs (and, to a lesser degree, Mexico's other indigenous peoples) to mythic status. As these few examples indicate, this is a diverse, complex, and rich formal heritage.<sup>26</sup> Crucially, for both artists and activists in the Chicano movement, this formal heritage is firmly bound to a distinct history of massive social and political change. For the Mexican diaspora within the United States, the legacy of the Revolution draws from this complex, living history. It derives from various sources, including oral histories and memories, images and interpretations of the Revolution produced on both sides of the border in addition to state-sanctioned (Mexican and US) versions of its meaning. Insofar as signs and symbols have come to stand in for the memory of the Revolution, those signs and symbols have simultaneously represented the transformative potential of organized, popular revolt.

Divorcing those forms recognized as “Revolutionary” from a broadly political, working-class context is virtually unthinkable in a Mexican-Chicano context. For Chicanos and Chicanas alike, the historical weight and power of the term “revolutionary,” then, means that, whatever else “revolutionary” might refer to during the civil rights era in the US, it always also refers to “la Revolución” of 1910–1920. Historical memory does not heed political borders, and one Revolutionary generation's heroes surely might merge with the revolutionary symbols and ideas of another. This legacy includes the *cartuchos*, *bandilleros*, and the many supermasculine heroes (including Pancho Villa) who transformed acts of violence into political and social unrest and change.

The limitations of this gendered legacy for “revolutionary” writers quickly became apparent for those who would call on it. Throughout Latin America, gender standards that proscribed women from even a literary occupation of the political sphere crossed national lines, linguistic differences, and time. Even at the peak of the second-wave women's movement in the US, the public act of writing—about any

topic—was socially unacceptable for Chicanas.<sup>27</sup> In this sense, “the fact that she is even writing” constitutes a challenge to the social expectations for Chicanas. “Breaking the silence,” however, is not commensurate with the revolutionary act. As José Martí wrote, the “struggle of book against sword” is both useless and wearying: poems, which may perhaps “forge swords,” are not themselves swords.<sup>28</sup> Illustrated another way, we might recall that Diego Rivera’s painting “The Arsenal” (1928) shows Frida Kahlo distributing arms, not painting the (admittedly, often graphically gruesome and embodied) diminutive personal works for which she is best known.

For Chicanos/as, claiming the legacy of the revolutionary necessarily insists on the violent public role of the *revolucionario*. Like Rita Sanchez, Cisneros writes herself and her comrades into history as esteemed “Revolutionaries,” calling attention to the role of women in political struggle both within the United States and in Mexico, in the present and the past. Instead of reinserting women into the masculine Revolution by either ascribing revolutionary actions to them or by naming “women’s work” as “revolutionary,” however, Cisneros calls attention to and deflates the synonymous association of “revolution” with masculinity: something *Cartucho* does as well. Like Campobello, Cisneros accomplishes this both in terms of subject (by imagining women and children as critical “revolutionary” actors) and in terms of style (by making the simple *cuento*, for instance, an appropriate, revolutionary form). Rather than redirecting the term “revolutionary” away from a threatening violence, Cisneros attempts to invest the nonmasculine subject (the child, the woman, the writer) with the historically and culturally loaded significance of the transformative, utopian, and—notably—materially dangerous power of bloody revolution.

To make this assertion is to locate something else in *Mango Street* than what has been usually found there. Literary critics as well as Cisneros’s sizable general readership have tended to celebrate the text as a story detailing the transformation of the heroine into a social activist/writer, a model minority for the youth expected to read her work.<sup>29</sup> Such an interpretation places *Mango Street*’s testimonies of the struggles associated with youth, womanhood, racism, and poverty within a coherent Western bourgeois tradition: that of the *künstlerroman*, the story of the development of the artist.<sup>30</sup> Tracing this sort of narrative, that of the heroic individual’s development as writer, demands that one focus primarily on the growth or change of Esperanza, the first-person narrator of this text. But this categorization does not do justice to *Mango Street*, which, when read within the collective-oriented social and political tradition of the *testimonio*, seems to rub against the triumphant, individualistic tradition of the *künstlerroman* more than it actually works within it.<sup>31</sup> The text itself seems to lack the significant growth essential to the typical *künstlerroman*, narratively undermining a plot of progress and development in a number of ways. First, the oral quality of the narratives, which many critics have taken note of, depends on the repetition of words, phrases, and vivid images throughout; this aurally gives the text a basically static and circular quality. Second, the content of Esperanza’s stories are fairly undifferentiated from the first to the last: each functions as a brief anecdote that concludes, jarringly,

without the genre's familiar concluding epiphany that would assure us that things would never be the same again. More broadly, the collection of stories does not seem to project a necessary linear trajectory: indeed it is difficult to tell whether they are even arranged in chronological order. Finally, the retrospective tone of the work neither predicts nor anticipates the happy "success" of either Esperanza or of the other characters. Such narrative strategies offer little suggestion that either she or the others in the barrio are likely to move, change, grow, or progress. These narrative features—all of which are employed in *Cartucho*—could be productively considered part of the legacy of antiprogressivist experiments in plot and structure typical of high modernist literature, and, as Jorge Aguilar Mora's close analysis of Campobello's style shows, these formal devices fundamentally work against the more straightforward realist tradition in literature (and more particularly, I might add, with the *künstlerroman*).<sup>32</sup>

The result of squeezing *Mango Street* into this interpretive context, then, is that readers have tended to minimize the broad swath of destruction and desperation that the stories record. Esperanza's devastating personal accounts of victimization recorded within *Mango Street*, including rape and early eroticization as well as her feelings of shame and loneliness, have become subordinated to a narrative of personal triumph. Moreover, the stories Esperanza records of the damage done to others who live in the barrio—to Sally and Rachel and Marin and Sire and Edna's Ruthie and Geraldo No Name—tend, likewise, to be passed over, even while the text's polyphonic voices disrupt the reader's attention to a single protagonist's growth and change over time. Here, Cisneros makes use of what Horacio Legrás describes (in the context of Mexican Revolutionary-era murals) as "the populist trope *par excellence*," enumeration, in order to focus on community rather than a single individual.<sup>33</sup> The oral quality of the storytelling, the retrospective narration, the general tone of indictment rather than celebration, and, most significantly, the refusal to present significant "growth" of Esperanza over the course of the text point us away from the comedic *bildungsroman* or *künstlerroman* models and instead toward the tragic *testimonio*. While Jacqueline Doyle's important essay on *Mango Street* argues that Cisneros is "covertly [engaged with] . . . making room" within the individualistic Western tradition of the *bildungsroman*, I see Cisneros attempting to explode an individualistic tradition that does not promise a fundamental, community-wide change.<sup>34</sup> This is a serious mode—an arguably urgent one—that more properly belongs within a "revolutionary" tradition imbued with an obligation to a larger social community.<sup>35</sup> To see *Mango Street* within this tradition is to shift the way we understand its participation—and, by extension, its author's participation—within the realm of the social and the political.

*Mango Street*'s pointed departures from a Western *künstlerroman* tradition indicate a rejection of that tradition, a formal strategy that Cisneros employs elsewhere in her work. One of Cisneros's snarky poems—the snarkiness is emphasized by the deliberate doggerel—illustrates this succinctly: "I am the woman of myth and bullshit. / (True. I authored some of it.)"<sup>36</sup> As this not atypical couplet demonstrates,



Cisneros draws attention to her self-conscious invocation (and spurning) of a literary heritage that celebrates a belabored, refined, and educated craft. Cisneros's defiance of middle-class manners and codes may help to account for a critical tendency to devalue the serious nature of her work. In an early discussion of *Mango Street*, for example, Ilan Stavans complained that *Mango Street*, formally, is fairly indistinguishable from its flamboyant author. Clearly, he reviles Cisneros's "parad[ing]," "bask[ing]," "infuriating," "theatrical" self, along with her "nasty, taboo-breaking attitude."<sup>37</sup> Though purportedly discussing the (inferior) quality of *Mango Street* as "Literature," Stavans conflates text, author, and audience, finally summing them all up as "immature." He describes the text as "a debutante's first turn around the dance floor," its central character he identifies as the "preteenage" Esperanza, its readers a "broad audience of young school girls," and Cisneros herself as a "pubescent protester."<sup>38</sup> For Stavans, the text's worthlessness transparently reveals itself by way of its association with adolescent girls—as writers, readers, and narrators. Who, he seems to ask, could take girls seriously?

This is a question that had been proposed, long before, about literature in Mexico. Tracing a literary-critical history of form across borders and to the Revolutionary period, one discovers that it was in similarly gendered terms that narrative style was discussed and debated in the little magazines that surfaced in the post-Revolutionary cultural hotbed of Mexico City. Julio Jiménez Rueda's article "El afeminamiento en la literatura mexicana" (1924) lamented that the literature being produced by young Mexican writers did not equal its times: it was not sufficiently virile, courageous, heroic, patriotic, raw, straightforward.<sup>39</sup> In his view, much modern Mexican literature—he called it *literatura afeminada*—was "rodeado de una aureola de silencio y alusiones, a manera de eufemismo" (surrounded by an aura of silence and allusion, euphemistic). This was, of course, a slur. A serious subject demanded a serious treatment by a serious author: girly writing, by girly authors, was not Revolutionary writing.

The authors Jiménez Rueda had in mind primarily included poets affiliated with the *Contemporáneos*, whose writing shared affinities with the Symbolists and surrealists in both Europe and in greater Latin America.<sup>40</sup> These authors worked within a decadent mode of writing that, in a well-known essay of 1900, Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó had aligned with a distinctively Latino "Ariel" (as opposed to the more utilitarian and scientific "Prospero" of the United States). As demonstrated by Ricardo L. Ortíz, at the particular historical moment in which the essay appeared, and certainly in the following years, the Ariel aesthetic that Rodó championed was aligned with femininity.<sup>41</sup> Jiménez Rueda's attack on the *Contemporáneos* continued the conversation about style within a specifically national (rather than hemispheric) context, condemning the group's aesthetic as inappropriate to the very masculine setting of the Mexican Revolution. In the exchanges about the proper gender (and, by connection, sexuality) of Revolutionary style that appeared in *El Universal* and *La Antorcha* throughout the twenties, this line of attack sparked no debate. Instead,

anything feminine was fairly unanimously considered un- (if not counter-) Revolutionary. The terms of this debate left little room for a woman writer to respond: she could not claim relevance in the times without writing in a Revolutionary style, and such a style—whatever its features—was decidedly named as masculine.

Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho* appeared in the wake of the debate about Revolutionary style. Interestingly, it was published not by the *Contemporáneos* but by their attackers, the virile *estridentista* press, *Ediciones Integrales*. *Cartucho* was not only the first “novel of the Mexican Revolution” to be originally published within Mexico but also the first of a handful to be written by women.<sup>42</sup> It is also distinct in that, while it explicitly takes the Revolution as its subject matter, it does not directly describe the fighting and bloodshed on the frontlines. Instead it relocates the Revolution on the home front, in the domestic space. Despite the work's ostensible defense of Pancho Villa as a great general and beloved man, it largely dispenses with the heroes of the Revolution and focuses, instead, on the everyday experiences of foot soldiers and supporters. The book is organized around a girl and her mother, women whose relationships to the wartime activities of the Revolution are secondary: they mend clothes for the soldiers, they cook for them, they witness their mobilization, they mourn, and they tell the stories of the dead. In this text, Campobello reclaims the Revolution from a historicization process through which heroic men and their deeds have come to stand in for a popular movement, and she reframes the Revolution in terms of women's everyday experience.<sup>43</sup>

Though the writings by the *estridentistas* generally adhered to the “masculine” style advocated by Jiménez Rueda, *Cartucho* notably does not. Instead its *relatos* are passive accounts of witness and imagination—anything but direct, brave, and crude. Elena Poniatowska, herself an author of a woman-centered narrative of the Mexican Revolution, describes *Cartucho* as a collection of “impressions, brilliant images seen from the balcony,” psychological events rather than journalistic reports.<sup>44</sup> The focus is not on the “action”—the story of the battles proper—but on the effects of the war on a child's mind. Describing Campobello's style, Vicky Unruh observes that her “signature characterization technique . . . [involves] the stylization of a single trait,” as well as the “juxtapos[ition of] the singular and the ordinary with a periodic inclination toward the grotesque,” a description that could also fit Cisneros's *Mango Street*.<sup>45</sup> In fact, Campobello's imagistic prose can be understood as a formally based refutation of the supposedly direct relationship between the straight, masculine style and the Revolution. Ironically enough, challenging this notion head-on meant challenging it euphemistically, lyrically, unheroically, in a roundabout way.

Campobello's protagonist is, significantly, a nameless young girl (and as little as women were regarded in the political and social estimation, girls meant even less) who witnesses the spectacle of the Revolution as a part of her daily life. The narrative employs what Horacio Legrás describes as a “poetics of the prosaic,” which reflects her fear and shock at the violence of the Revolution, even when her words and thoughts are too unsophisticated to register and communicate these feelings.<sup>46</sup> Such

a poetics is characterized by an idiomatically inscribed nonchalance when describing the carnage that the Revolution has deposited outside of her window. What is especially stunning is that the brief narratives barely register any significant emotion: they seem so slight and improvisational that one wonders if a bloody battle is actually going on in the vicinity at all.

At the same time, while the vignettes unfold within the supposedly sanctified, feminine space of the domestic world of the little girl, we realize fairly quickly that she is no disinterested witness to the Revolution. Indeed she is intimately involved in the lives and deaths of the combatants on both sides, as well as those of civilians who have been caught in the crossfire (such as her cousin, who is almost kidnapped by revolutionaries). In one suggestive story, “Zafiro and Zequiél,” she recalls how she came to know two Indians who would walk past her home every day, remembering that she would squirt them with water from a syringe and laugh when they ran from her. The two men are familiar figures in the town, like all of the soldiers she describes, not faceless fighters in some distant, cordoned-off battle zone. The little girl recalls,

One cold, cold morning I was told as I left my house, “Hey, they’ve executed Zequiél and his brother. They’re lying up there outside the cemetery, and no one’s left in the soldier’s barracks.”

My heart didn’t leap, nor was I frightened or even curious, but I started to run. I found them next to one another. Zequiél face down and his brother looking at the sky. Their eyes were wide open, very blue and clouded over, as if they had been crying. . . . Their blood had frozen. I gathered it up and put it in the pocket of one of their blue-tassled jackets. It was like little red crystals that would never again turn into warm threads of blood.

I saw their shoes, covered with dust. They no longer looked like houses to me. Today they were hunks of black leather that could tell me nothing about my friends.

I broke the syringe.<sup>47</sup>

These words conclude the story; the girl records no further thoughts. The story from which this example comes has fewer than three hundred words, taking up less than one full page. It is typical of the others, usually referred to in Spanish as *estampas* (impressions): brief, fleeting, imagistic. Why did the soldiers’ shoes now seem ordinary, whereas before they seemed fanciful? Why did she pick up the pieces of blood? Why did she break the syringe? “Parecían cuentos. No son cuentos” (They seemed like fables for children. They are not children’s fables), wrote Campobello in her preface to the 1931 edition, and, indeed, each of these stories seem as if they contain a latent lesson of some sort, a lesson that the reader must draw herself.<sup>48</sup>

In Campobello's view, these impressionistic tales are delicate, pure, but—at the same time—have a dangerous edge to them (“fina, limpia, agudita”).<sup>49</sup> The bite of the tales lies in their irony. Verbal irony, characterized by the jocular understatement and sarcasm of the narrative as well as the verbal play of the characters, forms the foundation of the narrative style. In the brief course of the first story, the reader learns to identify the irony at work. In this tale, “*Cartucho*” (usually translated as “cartridge”) is the name given to a man who comes to stand for all soldiers and, more expansively, for the way in which all common soldiers metaphorically become little more than ammunition in a war that is not at all in their own hands. He “didn’t say his name” but confesses that “he was a *cartucho* because of a woman.”<sup>50</sup> The word/name is repeated several times in the very short story, and it slightly changes with each repetition. The story closes when one of the other soldiers reports that *Cartucho* had “finally found what he was looking for” and that “‘Love made a *cartucho* of him. And us? . . . *Cartuchos*.’ So he said, in a philosophic prayer, buckling on his cartridge belt” (6). When the word *cartucho* is aligned with the man who was gunned down, and then shifted to all soldiers, the act of knowingly buckling on one’s *cartuchera* becomes tantamount to suicide. His declaration of intent, here, is braced with a levity that belies the consequences of being a “*cartucho*.” This stylistic mode of irony, the grotesque, subverts meaning through the shocking juxtaposition of incompatible images and tones. It is evident in moments throughout many of the *cuentos*. General Sobarzo’s guts are seen as “a pretty thing” (35), for instance, and the pouch of a dead man’s jacket, torn by bullets, looks like a “shredded rose” (26).

The tales also maintain a certain dramatic irony in which the first-person narrator tells the story *as remembered* from a child’s perspective, not as an adult (though the stories are clearly narrated from an adult’s vantage point). Such a narrative strategy quietly calls attention to the gap between the naiveté of a little girl confronting war and the experience of the adult who has lived through it.<sup>51</sup> This is explicitly highlighted in “Grime,” when the little girl narrator describes a dashing young soldier—something of a dandy—who she admires and pretends is her doll’s boyfriend. When she discovers José Díaz, “the one with the red car, the beau of all the ladies of Segunda del Rayo,” “lying face down, hair all ruffled and dirty, hands broad and brown, the nails black,” she reports, “my heart cringed to see him. ‘In this ugly alleyway!’ I said when I saw his face. I was shocked” (31). The irony is multilayered here, as the child directly denies the bulk of the preceding narration that is visible on the facing page: “No, no! He was never the beau of Pitaflorida, my doll, who broke her head when she fell out of the window. She never laughed with him” (31). Such a disavowal—which the reader immediately must recognize as untrue—serves to remind the reader that this child is only a child: that her stories, while perhaps containing a certain psychological or emotional truth, are not to be understood as factually, literally true.

Some other version of truth is revealed to be at stake here. The irony reminds us that these tales are more substantial than they seem and that they are not to be

read transparently; they have a deceptive power. Girl child or not, Campobello insists that her stories are the gruesome results of Revolution, “*mis fusilados*.” The word choice here is especially interesting, which suggests that the dead men belong to her: they are her dead to mourn and her victims at the same time. While the stories sleep innocently in her little book, she writes in her preface, they are born of her desire to avenge the deaths of her countrymen; reading them can animate the reader to savagery. These stories are nothing less than “*mis hombres muertos. Mis juguetes de la infancia*” (My dead men. My childhood playthings).<sup>52</sup> For Campobello, the horrific scenes of death and violence that she encounters are as much a part of childhood as toys: commonplace. And this, too, is ironically inappropriate for any child, and for a girl in particular, who is supposed to play happily with dolls. As Doris Meyer points out, “the child’s detachment in the face of daily tragedy, her enjoyment of the spectacle of battle and its recounting, has the effect of jolting the reader into a heightened awareness of war’s brutal toll on the innocent.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed *Cartucho* is consistently thought of as both “revolutionary” in subject matter and style; its fragmented form can be interpreted as an “intense reflection on social violence” that refrains from overtly passing judgment on it in a didactic manner.<sup>54</sup>

Such innocents as Campobello’s protagonist are largely forgotten as participants (and casualties) of war.<sup>55</sup> However, *Cartucho* shows that the Revolution is no less a part of this little girl’s life because it has long been considered masculine territory; the political/historical breaks through what Campobello’s readers most likely would have understood as the domain of the feminine—the domestic, the apolitical, the neverending and thus ahistorical daily routine of women’s work—and transforms it, spectacularly, into bloody, Revolutionary space.<sup>56</sup> Within this space, the Revolution is portrayed, as Vicky Unruh claims, as “a continuum and a collective experience in which none are heroes unless all are heroes.”<sup>57</sup> In simply, sincerely (Campobello insists on this), and innocently telling these *cuentos-that-are-not-cuentos*, Campobello reveals the “unanimous and inalienable experience of the everyday” lives of women and children as essentially disruptive and bloody.<sup>58</sup> Revolutionary violence cannot be contained within battlefields and to the distinct deeds of brave men; even children become sociopolitical actors.

Less explicitly than *Cartucho*, *Mango Street* depicts the barrio of pre-Chicano movement Chicago as a war zone, particularly for the women and children who are the predominant victims of a combination of pervasive poverty, racism, and sexism. Like the Revolutionary battlegrounds, the mean streets of Cisneros’s barrio are frequently characterized as masculine spaces, romanticized sites for men’s stories of courage and struggle.<sup>59</sup> But just as *Cartucho* reveals domestic life as a casualty of the Revolution, *Mango Street* proposes that “female domestic space [is] a legitimate site of struggle”—indeed a site of life-and-death struggle, at that.<sup>60</sup> As in *Cartucho*, in *Mango Street*, death is shown to be a quotidian experience, as is the threat of sexual violation, isolation, fear, and trauma. Significantly, each of these texts is presented from the limited perspective of one of the least of the community’s members, a little girl,

virtually a nonentity, someone to be neither seen nor heard. Like Campobello, Cisneros employs, as her narrator, an unexpected storyteller: “an anti-academic voice—a child’s voice, a girl’s voice, a poor girl’s voice, a spoken voice, the voice of an American-Mexican.”<sup>61</sup> Such a voice might be easily dismissed, and one might presume that this girl is incapable of telling a meaningful story. Indeed the narrative is, like Campobello’s, brief, lyrical, and fragmented: the reader must assemble a story from its parts, taking care to account for the disparate characters and scenes. Neither is a coherent “novel” in a strict definition of the term.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, their topical and formal similarities inform one another.

As with *Cartucho*, *Mango Street* is not served well by a transparent reading. For example, very elementary questions about the plot—questions that should have definite answers under the scrutiny of a simple reading—remain unanswered: Does Esperanza indeed “progress” in some fashion over the course of this narrative? Is this a triumphant story? A tragedy? Is Esperanza, though a child, a reliable storyteller? Answering these questions is more difficult than many descriptions of the work suggest; structurally, formally, the text casts doubt on Esperanza’s words. Like *Cartucho*, *Mango Street* is suffused with a very pointed kind of irony that serves to remind us, from time to time, that the narrator is only a child, one who embellishes and fantasizes throughout the text. Acknowledging Esperanza’s partial and incomplete knowledge of the world—including the world of the barrio that she describes in her stories—has the potential to change how we understand the text. Rather than seeing *Mango Street* as a singular, synthetic, coming-of-age or development-of-the-artist narrative, one that “crush[es] citizen-subjects into positionalities,” we may instead dwell within the possibility that this is the sort of “confounding” work Chela Sandoval describes in *Methodology of the Oppressed*: a transitive text comprised of multiple subjects who are formed through “interpretation, translation, stuttering, and the partly understood.”<sup>63</sup>

Like Campobello’s young narrator, Esperanza experiences violence, fear, and shame as everyday occurrences: they are her childhood playthings. As in *Cartucho*, some of the most horrifying scenes are narrated as unexceptional events from the perspective of a child who is only dimly aware that such events might be nightmarish.<sup>64</sup> A representative story in this collection that narrates the death of a neighbor child stylistically echoes Campobello’s revolutionary writing. The title, “There was an old woman who had so many children she didn’t know what to do,” belies the impact of the tragedy. Like many fairy tales or nursery rhymes, this one has both a gruesome plot and an ending with a pointed lesson: “See. That’s just what I mean. No wonder everybody gave up. Just stopped looking out when little Efren chipped his buck tooth on a parking meter and didn’t even stop Refugia from getting her head stuck between two slats in the back gate and nobody looked up not once the day Angel Vargas learned to fly and dropped from the sky like a sugar donut, just like a flying star, and exploded down to earth without even an ‘Oh.’”<sup>65</sup> The run-on sentence speeds the reader along, not even pausing to emphasize that “nobody looked up not once”: the velocity and

brevity of the narration of this death recalls the stylistic features that Mora describes as especially distinctive of Campobello's *Cartucho*.<sup>66</sup> A casual or lazy reader, lulled by the story's childish title and light tone and distracted by the grotesque, red-herring imagery of "sugar donut" and "flying star," might miss the horrific death of the innocent *angelito*. If the reader indeed skims through the *cuentito* without really pausing to think about it, the lesson of the tale will simply be lost. However, if the reader, jolted by the abrupt ending ("Oh.") to the very long final sentence, pauses to consider its meaning, she will find herself incriminated along with the rest of the community that failed to prevent—or even acknowledge—the death of Angel Vargas. When read aloud, this last sentence is followed by a stunning silence, one that represents the unfulfilled expectation of a collision of body and pavement; this is transcribed on the written page as gaping white space, which provides the speechless, unwritten conclusion.<sup>67</sup>

Esperanza's failure to acknowledge the death as being unusual or horrible (her image of the sugar donut is especially grotesque) underscores her early desensitization to such violence—a desensitization that Campobello's critics frequently note in discussions of *Cartucho*. She narrates her simple story as if it were *chisme*, gossip, a *cuentito*, something that could easily have happened somewhere else, to someone else, perhaps even in a fairy tale or in the alternate universe of magical realism.<sup>68</sup> Tragically, ironically, immaturely, Esperanza seems to have mistold this story: the telling is all wrong. Such a mistelling draws the reader's attention to the similarities between the narrative strategies for depicting violence within the domestic sphere shared by Campobello and Cisneros.<sup>69</sup> While the child may not be able to explicitly register this event as horrific, the child's perspective enables the writer to highlight its tragedy. Poniatowska's characterization of this distinctive employment of the grotesque could be applied to either text: "[the narrator is] a curious creature leafing inadvertently through a ghastly book that has nothing to do with her. And that's how she tells it, naively, with the candor of childhood: scenes that astonish in their cruelty and because they are witnessed by a little girl."<sup>70</sup> More, Esperanza's narration resembles the dramatic irony that we find in Campobello's stories, which asks the reader to pretend along with the little girl Esperanza that this was indeed "the day Angel Vargas learned to fly," a story told retrospectively but still naively. In the moment of narration, we accept her version of the event. But by the time we finish reading the tale, we know with a certainty that Angel Vargas does NOT learn to fly at all.

*Mango Street*, like *Cartucho*, depicts the domestic war zone through child's play and storytelling: in both texts, the devastation such an experience causes at emotional and social levels is clear. If Angel Vargas is part of what we might euphemistically refer to as the "collateral damage" of barrio life, Esperanza's inability to express shock or grief at her neighbor's death is also an index of the trauma that, as a daily witness to such acts, she experiences. Such stories are instructive in that their narrator's nonchalance—even whimsy—in the face of extreme violence calls for resistance from

the reader: these are stories to be horrified by, not inured to. Like Cisneros's *Esperanza*, Campobello's child narrator minimally acknowledges the deaths of those common foot soldiers who have been completely obliterated from a hegemonic history of the Revolution, such as the indigenous recruits Zafiro and Zequiél. That the deaths seem to have little impact on the girl or the more immediate community seems to point in two directions: existentially, to the unforgivably tragic waste of human life in the midst of not-quite-comprehensible struggle, but also, more purposefully, to a protest of that waste through the ethical act of naming and remembering the dead.<sup>71</sup> That both Campobello and Cisneros make a child the bearer of the grave responsibility to remember and bear witness is shocking and provocative: a child surely cannot be blamed for misunderstanding the horror of death and imaginatively turning a grisly incident into a plaything for dolls or a sugar donut, but the fact that no one else seems to be taking up that responsibility is morally appalling. Where is the mature and serious historian who should tell this story, who should name these names? They are forgotten, expendable members of society who met a premature death. Cisneros's *testimonio* of the death of Angel Vargas is a fundamentally performative event, not the slight description it seems to be: it requires a response.<sup>72</sup> At the very least, the piece demands a twinge of guilt, a feeling of responsibility for this child from the reader, not only by way of the content of the story, but even more viscerally by the rhythm and style of the prose.

Critically, Cisneros implicates her reader *along with Esperanza* and her neighbors, bringing her reader into the community to share both their collective loss and their collective guilt. The narrative does not permit the reader to simply gawk at the wrecked lives of the Vargas family or point blame at Rosa Vargas for not keeping better watch over her kids. Instead Cisneros works to transform the experience of reading a narrative about barrio life to one of interaction with it by way of a physiological reaction to the story. In other words, the performance of the storyteller, breathlessly rollicking through the final, tragic conclusion, demands an action from a responsive audience. As John Beverley observes, "*testimonio* might be seen as a kind of speech act that sets up special ethical and epistemological demands. . . . What *testimonio* asks of its readers is in effect what [Richard] Rorty means by solidarity—that is, the capacity to identify their own selves, expectations, and values with those of another."<sup>73</sup> *Mango Street*, if considered within the *testimonio* genre, can be understood to demand more than a passive spectatorship from its readers. Instead it asks them to share a feeling of responsibility for the tragedy.

Who shall assume this responsibility, Cisneros prompts us? Should the responsibility for this death be placed at the feet of the community? This story directly asks the question, echoing what seems to be a truism that somehow the child—or his mother—or his community—was responsible for his death. Throughout the book, *Esperanza* repeats versions of a simple refrain that seems to point toward the essential inevitability of the tragedy: "they are bad those Vargases."<sup>74</sup> Despite the fact that the reader sees no more badness than children's mischief from the Vargas kids (they



“bend trees and bounce between cars and dangle upside down from knees and almost break. . . . They think it’s funny” [29]), such a pat assessment excuses both the community—who are in fact shown intervening and taking care of the children—and the larger social structure from responsibility: “No wonder everybody gave up,” Esperanza explains (30). The sense Esperanza has that the child’s death was unpreventable and that no one, in fact, should bear responsibility for the poverty, racist discrimination, and legal and social disempowerment that her community faces on a daily basis emerges more forcefully toward the end of the book, as Esperanza fantasizes about leaving the barrio. When her friend Alicia assures her that “one day you’ll come back too,” Esperanza replies, “Not me. Not until somebody makes it better” (107). The nebulous “somebody” that Esperanza invokes here seems the inverse of the “everybody” of the earlier story, but here the story directs the reader beyond the individual community and calls on the most significant representative of the larger social, political, and legal structures that a little girl can imagine: the mayor. “Who’s going to do it? The mayor? / And the thought of them coming to Mango Street makes me laugh out loud. / Who’s going to do it? Not the mayor” (107). While Esperanza’s laugh clearly indicates her incredulity at such an idea—within her limited sphere, the mayor has never taken an interest in either her struggle for survival or the general betterment of the community—the reader may entertain the possibility differently. In fact, the story’s invocation of the mayor seems reasonable enough, and the reader may begin, here, asking why no intervention on behalf of this community has been undertaken thus far. Indeed the reader may be prompted to insist that a change of civic priorities—of revolutionary proportions—start to take place.

Cisneros calls on some of the formal characteristics of the *testimonio* in order to signal her intention to speak truth to power (in Campobello’s words, an “obligación de hablar”), even while Esperanza, the child narrator, does not possess the political consciousness that serves a public interest.<sup>75</sup> Esperanza’s repeatedly stated desire to escape the barrio is a natural one. However, because *Mango Street* is the story of a group, not an individual, the reader is invited to consider the effects of her escape. Even if Esperanza returns one day, as suggested in the final story, to help “those who cannot out,” the reader is left to wonder what will happen in the interim, while Esperanza is busy with “all those books and paper”?<sup>76</sup> What will happen to the multitude of neighbors and friends named (and still to be named, as the title suggests) in the story “And Some More”? By ending the book with this promise to return, Cisneros structurally casts doubt on the viability of individual escape as an effective model for community-wide uplift, at least in the near term.<sup>77</sup>

In merging a narrative form traditionally associated with children, the *cuento* or tale, with the extreme violence appropriate to the masculine narratives of war and revolution, Cisneros and Campobello rewrite women and children into revolutionary history. Though the home is commonly thought of as a private, apolitical, domestic space, Cisneros and Campobello rewrite the home as a war zone: a public, political space. What takes place in the domestic domains that these texts describe is

fundamentally inseparable from the violence of social struggle, whether in the barrio or the battleground. Distinctions between these two traditionally distinct zones are dissolved; domestic tales become revolutionary ones; women's (and children's) narratives of war, revolution, and violence merge with more familiar masculine ones. Campobello's *cartuchos* and Cisneros's *Molotovs* explode the myth that war involves only heroic men in the distinct masculine space of the battlefield as they underline the "discontinuities between violence, political emancipation and agency" in these texts.<sup>78</sup> Along the same lines, by rereading these texts within the larger tradition of the *testimonio*, we can see them not only as the beautifully written, minor stories they have been recognized as but as works that make distinct political appeals to their readers. Campobello's *Cartucho* is thus acknowledged as an important, early antecedent to the *testimonio* tradition, solidifying the often-discussed connections that this particular form has to women's revolutionary (leftist) writing across Latin America. A simultaneous formal reading of these two texts also shows how they invoke the specifically Mexican legacy of the revolutionary actor, a resolutely masculine hero, while attempting to write into Mexican-Chicano history (and *historia*) the barely legible image of the female—and feminine—revolutionary. The very specific literary-historical context of Cisneros's formal "Molotov," traced back through Campobello's *Cartucho*, releases a Chicana reference to revolution that is ominous and fully loaded.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rita Sanchez, "Chicana Writer Breaking Out of Silence," in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma M. Garcia and Mario T. Garcia (New York: Routledge, 1997), 66.

<sup>2</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, claim that enunciation (including writing) can be a revolutionary act when articulated from a minoritarian perspective. This seems more political wishing than fact: if we accept their claim that "the literary machine" is "the relay for a revolutionary machine-to-come," this still does not mean that literature is revolution. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Sanchez's account of her activism in this period and its relationship to the Chicano movement within the civil rights context is recorded in a short oral interview by Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr., and at greater length in her papers, held at Stanford University. Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr., "Rita Sanchez: An Oral Interview," *San Diego History* 55, nos. 1–2 (2009): 47–52.

<sup>4</sup> Sandra Cisneros, introduction to *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Knopf, 1994), xv.

<sup>5</sup> As Sonia Saldívar-Hull has noted, *Mango Street*'s first publisher, Arte Público, listed it as a book for "Young Readers." Sonia Saldívar-Hull, *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 82.

<sup>6</sup> For different perspectives on the "simplicity" of the text, see Felicia J. Cruz, "On the 'Simplicity' of Sandra Cisneros's *House on Mango Street*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 47, no. 4 (2001): 910–46; Juan Rodríguez, review of *The House on Mango Street*, *Austin Chronicle*, August 10, 1984; and Ilan Stavans, "Sandra Cisneros: Form Over Content," *Academic Questions* 9, no. 4 (1996): 29–34.

<sup>7</sup> Uruguayan literary critic Angel Rama asks this question somewhat differently: can the *letrado* can ever act as something other than a force of colonial stability and class privilege? See Angel Rama, *The Lettered City*, trans. John Charles Chasteen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 16–28.

<sup>8</sup> Adaljiza Sosa Riddell, "Chicanas and El Movimiento," in Garcia and Garcia, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 93. See also Angie Chabram-Dernersesian, "I throw punches for my race, but I don't want to be a man: Writing us—Chica-nos (girl/us)/Chicanas—into the movement script," in *The Chicana/o Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Angie Chabram-Dernersesian (New York: Routledge, 2006), 165–82.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Cisneros, *Loose Woman: Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 114. Cisneros is one of a number of Chicana authors who, in a semi-serious, semi-hyperbolic mode, take on and transform the particularly macho, revolutionary name of Pancho Villa. Notable among these is Tey Diana Rebolledo, who has made the figure of "Panchita Villa," a literary critic, her alter ego. See Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Panchita Villa and Other Guerrillas: Essays on Chicana/Latina Literature and Criticism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> John Alba Cutler has considered the barrio as a common trope through which Chicano writers have compared Viet Nam revolutionaries with Chicano revolutionaries: he argues that they reimagine the barrio as a war zone and thus an appropriate site for a simultaneous critique of US domestic terrorism toward its own citizenry. See John Alba Cutler, "Disappeared Men: Chicana/o Authenticity and the American War in Viet Nam," *American Literature* 81, no. 3 (2009): 583–611.

<sup>11</sup> Campobello's text was the first of a series of books published by Germán List Arzubide's small press, *ediciones integrales*, while Cisneros's was first published in 1984 by Arte Público, a press devoted to publishing works by Chicana/o authors. Felicia Cruz discusses the move of Cisneros's *Mango Street* from its original publisher to the major publisher Vintage and its consequent reception (Cruz, "On the 'Simplicity'"). For *Cartucho*'s publication and reception, see Doris Meyer, "The Dialogics of Testimony: Autobiography as Shared Experience in Nellie Campobello's *Cartucho*," in *Latin American Women's Writing: Feminist Readings in Theory and Crisis*, ed. Anny Brooksbank Jones and Catherine Davies (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 46–65.

<sup>12</sup> Doris Sommer provides compelling discussions of the political valences of the *testimonio*, particularly in women's writing. See Doris Sommer, *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999). Other concise discussions of *testimonio* include John Beverley, "Testimonio, Subalternity, and Narrative Authority," in *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Castro-Klaren (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 571–83; and Meyer, "Dialogics of Testimony."

<sup>13</sup> This comes from Ranahit Guha by way of John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xii.

<sup>14</sup> Elena Poniatowska's *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1987) is an important intertext here: more explicitly than either *Cartucho* or *Mango Street*, it makes use of the *testimonio* form as a way of telling the story of its ex-Revolutionary protagonist. Poniatowska is also an important figure in the transborder literary history I am tracing because she translated *Mango Street* and included Campobello in her book of rebellious Mexican women, *Las Siete Cabritas* (México: Ediciones Era, 2000). Cisneros and Poniatowska have appeared together in numerous forums, including a conversation at DePaul University, "Echoes of a Revolution," on May 12, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> James A. Sandos considers this aspect of *testimonio* in the Americas in his review of Californio *testimonio* literature, such as that collected by Hubert Howe Bancroft in the late nineteenth century, arguing that power relations are quite complicated within the colonial context, regardless of gender. Linda S. Maier, in an earlier essay, emphasizes the ways in which women assume a "masculine prerogative" when they write in the public voice of the *testimonio*. See James A. Sandos, "Does the Term 'Subaltern' Apply to Colonial California?" *Reviews in American History* 36, no. 2 (2008): 160–70; and Linda S. Maier, "The Case for and the Case History of Women's Testimonial Literature in Latin America," in *Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women*, ed. Linda S. Maier and Isabel Dulfano (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 1–17.

<sup>16</sup> John Beverley reflects on his own interest in the genre in this intersectional context, and Georg Gugelberger notes that the majority of "progressive" intellectuals who embraced the *testimonio* in the US during this period were women, who also made up the majority of the producers of these texts. Beverley, *Testimonio*, xi; and Georg M. Gugelberger, ed., *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>17</sup> John Beverley, *Against Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 12–13.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the regional aspects of Campobello's work and its relationship to the recovery of Villa as a revolutionary hero, see Max Parra, *Writing Pancho Villa's Revolution: Rebels in the Literary Imagination of Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Meyer, "Dialogics of Testimony."

<sup>20</sup> In this sense my work has affinities with recent studies that discover a compelling relationship between ideology and narrative in Chicano literature, such as those found in Marcial González, *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class, and Reification* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); and Marissa K. López, “Chicano Literature: theoretically speaking, formally reading Ana Castillo’s *Sapogonia*,” *Aztlán* 32, no. 2 (2007): 139–56. These critics build from Ramón Saldívar’s important examination of form, story, and ideology: Ramón Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> The superb, extended prologue to the 2000 Spanish language edition of *Cartucho* by Jorge Aguilar Mora emphasizes Campobello’s distinctive narrative stylistics and her spare style and silences in particular. On this aspect of her work, see Jorge Aguilar Mora, “El silencio de Nellie Campobello,” in *Cartucho: Relatos de la lucha en el norte de México* (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 2000), 9–43. On silence and secrets in *testimonio*, see Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*.

<sup>22</sup> Cisneros, *House on Mango Street*, 107.

<sup>23</sup> From its initial publication, Nellie Campobello has been conflated with the narrator of *Cartucho*, who is frequently referred to as “Nellie.” However, the text does not name the narrator. Likewise, even though Cisneros distances herself from the narrator of *Mango Street* explicitly (the narrator’s name is Esperanza), she too is often conflated with her character. See, for instance, Stavans, “Sandra Cisneros.”

<sup>24</sup> Ramón Saldívar and Paula Moya, “Fictions of the Trans-American Imaginary,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 1 (2003): 1–18.

<sup>25</sup> The physical, intellectual, and emotional proximity of the Mexican Revolution greatly influenced the development of the Chicano movement, not least because so many Chicanos can trace the impetus of their family’s narrative of migration to the US to the Revolutionary-period social and political instability within Mexico.

<sup>26</sup> The Chicano cultural memory of the Mexican Revolution has been discussed in a number of critical works, including Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); Everard Meade, “Modern Warfare Meets ‘Mexico’s Evil Tradition’: Death, Memory, and Media During the Mexican Revolution,” *InterCulture* 5, no. 2 (2008): 119–49; and Rafael Perez-Torres, *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> The social pressures to conform to a feminine ideal that faced the women of La Raza were described by Enriqueta Longeaux y Vásquez, an attendee at the First National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference (1969) in Denver, Colorado. In her essay, “The Woman of La Raza,” *Magazín* 1, no. 4 (1972), she reported her frustration with the resolution of a women’s group that “the Chicana woman does not want to be liberated” (66) and details the particular pressures of poverty, racism, and sexism that have prevented women from even expressing the desire for liberation (see 66–68).

<sup>28</sup> José Martí, *Versos Sencillos: Simple Verses* (Houston: Arté Público, 1997), v.

<sup>29</sup> *Mango Street* has been very extensively discussed within and without a Chicano context. Important analyses include those by Héctor Calderón, *Narratives of Greater Mexico: Essays on Chicano Literary History, Genre, and Borders* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Jacqueline Doyle, “More Room of Her Own: Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*,” *MELUS* 19, no. 4 (1994): 5–35; Saldívar, *Chicano Narrative*; Saldívar-Hull, *Feminism on the Border*; and Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Doyle, “More Room of Her Own,” 10.

<sup>31</sup> Monika Kaup’s discussion of the text’s interest in Mango’s “street” (as opposed to the “house”) likewise concentrates on the larger social community that concerns Cisneros rather than Esperanza’s individual accomplishments. See Monika Kaup, “The Architecture of Ethnicity in Chicano Literature,” *American Literature* 69, no. 2 (1997): 361–97, especially 390–92.

<sup>32</sup> Mora, “El silencio de Nellie Campobello,” 14–15.

<sup>33</sup> Horacio Legrás, “The Mexican Revolution and the Plastic Arts,” in *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Castro-Klaren (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008): 379–96, 386.

<sup>34</sup> Doyle, “More Room of Her Own,” 7.

<sup>35</sup> Here, following René Jara, I underscore Cisneros’s literary participation within a culturally sanctioned tradition of speaking and writing on behalf of the people. See René Jara, “Prologo,” in *Testimonio y literatura*, ed. René Jara and Hernán Vidal (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 1–3. As Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano writes, “the Chicana writer finds that the self she seeks to define and love is not merely an individual self, but a collective one. . . . the power, the permission, the authority to tell stories about herself and other Chicanas comes from her cultural, racial/ethnic and linguistic community.” Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, “Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective,” in *Chicana Creativity and Activism: New Frontiers in American Literature*, ed. María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 215.

<sup>36</sup> Cisneros, *Loose Woman*, 114.

<sup>37</sup> My assessment of Stavans’s critique accords with that of Machado Sáez, who has argued that Stavans, one of the most prolific and iconoclastic discussants of US Latino Studies, tends to structure the Latino/a literary canon in a conservative, hispanocentric fashion. See Machado Sáez, “Reconquista: Ilan Stavans and Multiculturalist Latino/a Discourse,” *Latino Studies* 7 (2009): 410–34.

<sup>38</sup> Stavans, “Sandra Cisneros,” 29–34, 30.

<sup>39</sup> Julio Jiménez Rueda, “El afeminamiento en la literature Mexicana,” *El Universal*, December 20, 1924. Translations from this article are my own.

<sup>40</sup> Víctor Díaz Arciniega, *Querrela por la cultura “revolucionaria”* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989), 16. The *Contemporáneos* included Xavier Villarutia and Salvador Novo, who were known homosexuals; the accusation of effeminacy was undoubtedly a homophobic one as well as a sexist one. See also Rafael Hernández- Rodríguez, “Whose Sweaty Men Are They? Avant-Garde and Revolution in Mexico,” *CiberLetras: Revista de crítica literaria y de cultura* 8 (2002), <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ciberletras/vo8/hernandez.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Ricardo L. Ortíz, “Revolution’s Other Histories: The Sexual, Cultural, and Critical Legacies of Roberto Fernández Retamar’s ‘Caliban,’” *Social Text* 58, vol. 17, no. 1 (1999): 33–58.

<sup>42</sup> John Rutherford, *Mexican Society during the Revolution: A Literary Approach* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 57.

<sup>43</sup> Aside from the occasional image of the valiant *soldadera*, Mexican women (and especially poor, uneducated, rural women) have been mostly unaccounted for as political and social actors during this period.

<sup>44</sup> Elena Poniatowska, introduction to Nellie Campobello, *Cartucho: Relatos de la lucha en el norte de México*, trans. Doris Meyer and Irene Matthews (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), x.

<sup>45</sup> Vicky Unruh, *Performing Women and Modern Literary Culture in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 105–6.

<sup>46</sup> Legrás, “Mexican Revolution,” 142.

<sup>47</sup> Campobello, *Cartucho*, 19. Mora’s edition of the second (1940) edition of *Cartucho* includes all of the *estampas* that I cite in this essay; this is the Spanish-language text:

Una mañana fría fría, me dicen al salir de mi casa:  
“Oye, ya fusilaron a Zequiél y su hermano; allá están tirados afuera del camposanto, ya no hay nadie en el cuartel.”  
No me saltó el corazón, ni me asusté, ni me dio curiosidad; por eso corrí. Los encontré uno al lado del otro. Zequiél boca abajo y su hermano mirando al cielo. Tenían los ojos abiertos, muy azules, empañados, parecía como si hubieran llorado. No les pude preguntar nada, les conté los balazos, volteé la cabeza de Zequiél, le limpié la tierra del lado derecho de su cara, me conmoví un poquito y me dije dentro de mi corazón tres y muchas veces: “Pobrecitos, pobrecitos.” La sangre se había helado, la junté y se la metí

en la bolsa de su saco azul de borlón. Eran como cristalitos  
rojos que ya no se volverían hilos calientes de sangre.  
Les vi los zapatos, estaban polvosos; ya no me  
parecían casas; hoy eran unos cueros negros que no me  
podían decir nada de mis amigos.  
Quebré la jeringa. (64)

<sup>48</sup> Campobello, “Inicial,” in *Cartucho*, iv, my translation.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Campobello, *Cartucho*, 6.

<sup>51</sup> The “translation” that occurs in these texts, an important feature of the *testimonio* genre, is provided through a temporal distance from the present. Since they are both narrated “as remembered”—that is, from the perspective of the adult writer as she recalls the significant events of an unwritten girlhood—the translator is the adult writer and the translated subject is the young girl.

<sup>52</sup> Campobello, “Inicial,” iv, my translation.

<sup>53</sup> Meyer, “Dialogics of Testimony,” 55.

<sup>54</sup> Brian Gollnick, “Nellie Campobello,” in *The Encyclopedia of Latin American and Caribbean Literature, 1900–2003*, ed. Daniel Balderston and Mike Gonzalez (London: Routledge, 2004), 102.

<sup>55</sup> “Contrary to stereotypes about war deaths that feature male combatants, women are the majority of casualties in war. Over the past seventy years, the majority of war dead have been civilians, rising from 50 percent of the casualties in WWII to 90 percent of all war casualties in the 1990s—with women and children comprising the vast majority of civilian casualties,” writes Mary Hawkesworth, in “War as a Mode of Production and Reproduction: Feminist Analytics,” in *War and Terror: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Karen Alexander and Mary E. Hawkesworth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>56</sup> According to Legrás, “the true of everydayness has the upper hand against the colonizing truth of historical or nationalist territorialization.” Horacio Legrás, *Literature and Subjection: The Economy of Writing and Marginality in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 144.

<sup>57</sup> Unruh, *Performing Women*, 106.

<sup>58</sup> Legrás, “Mexican Revolution,” 146.

<sup>59</sup> Pilar E. Rodriguez Aranda, “On the Solitary Fate of Being Mexican, Female, Wicked and Thirty-three: An Interview with Writer Sandra Cisneros,” *The Americas Review* 18 (1990): 69. Cisneros calls attention to this, specifically taking umbrage at Piri Thomas’s characterization of the barrio as a place of excitement and freedom for men.



<sup>60</sup> Saldívar-Hull, *Feminism on the Border*, 85.

<sup>61</sup> Cisneros, introduction to *House on Mango Street*, xv.

<sup>62</sup> *Mango Street* seems neither a novel nor a story cycle, as both terms imply a progressive movement through time. The concluding story in *Mango Street*, in fact, returns the reader back to the first story by echoing the title: a suggestion that this book is a circular one more properly than a progressive one, and throwing a skeptical light on notions that Esperanza has developed and progressed over the course of the text. *Cartucho*, too, seems to me to work against notions of progression, particularly in the 1931 version of the text (it was revised and expanded for the second [authoritative] edition, which was first published in 1940). See Delia Poey, "Coming of Age in the Curriculum: *The House on Mango Street* and *Bless Me, Ultima* as Representative Texts," *The Americas Review* 24, nos. 3–4 (1996): 201–17; and James R. Giles, *Violence in the Contemporary American Novel: An End to Innocence* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>63</sup> Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 163, 175.

<sup>64</sup> While Cisneros invites readers from a variety of backgrounds into her text, most notably by way of her careful explanation of her child narrator's referents, this is not an invitation to total mastery of the text. Micol Siegel's admonishment that "foreign" readers (such as those outside of the community that the narrator Esperanza assumes) need to make a "deferral of understanding," to "relax a strict hold on 'reason' and convey research subjects' lives and worlds without altogether understanding them," may be a useful strategy for approaching this multivalent text. Micol Siegel, "World History's Narrative Problem," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 84, no. 3 (2004): 431–46. The spirit of cautionary reading is also advocated by Sommer, *Proceed with Caution*.

<sup>65</sup> Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 30–31.

<sup>66</sup> Mora, "El silencio de Nellie Campobello," 10.

<sup>67</sup> Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, read by Sandra Cisneros (New York: Random House Audio, 2005).

<sup>68</sup> Though this aspect of these texts are beyond the scope of this essay, I find especially compelling Mora's claim that Campobello's *Cartucho* was essential to the development of magical realism in Mexico by way of Juan Rulfo and extending to Gabriel García Márquez. See Mora, "El silencio de Nellie Campobello," 9–13.

<sup>69</sup> See Tabea Alexa Linhard, "A Perpetual Trace of Violence: Gendered Narratives of Revolution and War," *Discourse* 25, no. 3 (2003): 30–47.

<sup>70</sup> Poniatowska, introduction to Campobello, *Cartucho*, x.

<sup>71</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 115.

<sup>72</sup> Beverley, "Testimonio," 577.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 574.

<sup>74</sup> Cisneros, *House on Mango Street*, 29.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Meyer, “Dialogics of Testimony,” 51.

<sup>76</sup> Cisneros, *House on Mango Street*, 110.

<sup>77</sup> Critics such as Juan Rodríguez, who have noted that Esperanza’s desire to flee the barrio is counterrevolutionary, are on to something (quoted in Saldívar-Hull, *Feminism on the Border*, 84).

<sup>78</sup> Linhard, “Perpetual Trace of Violence,” 31.

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