

REPORT: THE LITERATURE AND JUSTICE PROJECT 2007-08

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What is the Literature and Justice Project? Participants and Goals.

The Project is a faculty-student research effort launched in August 2007 under the directorship of Prof. Vincent Farenga (COLT-Classics) and with the participation of three undergraduate research associates: Beatriz Manela (COLT major), Christine Matsuda (COLT major), and Alexandra Stewart (IR major). Sponsored by the Provost's Initiative for Undergraduate Research, this group met biweekly in 07-08 with the general goals of: (1) understanding how contemporary literature addresses problems of injustice in societies threatened by the absence or loss of human rights; (2) comparing literary concerns about injustice to models of justice in political philosophy and social theory. Ultimately the Project hopes to result in: (1) a book-length study devoted to some of the literary texts and models of justice, but also (2) identifying texts and issues suitable for individual researchers to develop in their own research.

Materials, Theoretical Models, and Themes. More specifically, we examined narrative materials (autobiography, memoir, testimonials, and fiction) that represent what it means for a subject to acquire a sense of injustice and to self-identify as its victim. We considered three types of narratives from a spectrum of cultures and societies around the world: (1) slave narratives, both historical (18th-19th centuries) and fictional slave narratives (20th-21st centuries); (2) testimonial fiction and reports from Latin America (20th century).; (3) narratives of exile and immigration (20th-21st centuries). Philosophically, we considered models for injustice based on: (1) maldistribution of wealth, power, and opportunity; (2) the struggle for recognition of oppressed individuals and groups and against their disrespect; and (3) psychic wounding or trauma. Two thematic questions predominated: (1) What kinds of perception, reasoning, and emotion contribute to a subject's cognitive awareness of victimization? (2) Can this awareness transform a subject's identity (individual or collective) and motivate him/her to resist injustice?

Part 1.1 Historical and Fictional Slave Narratives [Beatriz Manela did most of the research for this section]

In most classic slave narratives the first-person protagonist creates the story of an individual's journey from bondage to freedom. But the genre is not uniform in describing the paths these narrators take in developing what Judith Shklar calls a "sense of injustice," or the intensely personal way in which victims experience injustice through an anger and betrayal that can be linked to public order (1990). From a handful of the classic narratives we can identify several core experiences that enable a subject to perceive the injustice of slavery, but we should note right away how the experiences divide along gender lines. For male slaves, the acquisition of education, including the ability to read, write and speak publicly, not only revealed the brutality of slavery but also created possibilities for resistance through leadership roles among fellow slaves and even a following among the general public. Female slaves, on the other hand, experienced the injustice of sexual abuse by white masters and converted their roles as caregivers (mothers) for their children into instruments of resistance. We will consider a few cases of well known male slaves, but our principal interest lies with the female experience.

1.2 Use of Theoretical Models. Before discussing specific narratives, we can use a few theoretical models to understand how the experience of slavery in the Americas impacts the identity of its victims, both as individuals and as African-Americans—and not only in the classic narratives but in the contemporary fiction that reinvents stories of slavery for today's readers.

Axel Honneth, in *The Struggle for Recognition* [1995], *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (2003), and *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* [2007]), has identified three patterns through which individuals seek the recognition from others that is necessary to acquiring self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. These are: (1) engagement in loving, nurturing family relations; (2) the ability to see oneself as a bearer of legal rights and a morally responsible agent who understands both what others in society owe the self and what the self owes others; and (3) trust that one's own moral choices and beliefs will find confirmation in the shared values of society. When recognition is denied in each of these scenarios, the resulting disrespect, degradation or shame can "bring the identity of a person as a whole to the point of collapse" (1995: 131-32). The first kind of disrespect is particularly relevant to the slave experience, for it often deprives an individual of "any opportunity freely to dispose over his or her own body," often taking the form of torture and rape. The second kind impacts a person's moral self-respect and occurs when an individual is "structurally excluded from the possession of certain rights within a society" (133). The third type of disrespect denigrates an individual's or group's fundamental values as invalid or of no importance, depriving them of social self-esteem (134).

Arlene Keizer, in *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004), provides a useful typology of contemporary fiction about slavery that we can use to distinguish: (1) historical novels set in the period of slavery; (2) novels whose contemporary setting explicitly recalls the historical experience of slavery; and (3) hybrid works that creatively intertwine scenes from the present with scenes from the slave experience of the past. But more importantly, her typology makes it easier for us to see how contemporary black writers use the slave experience not so much "to protest past and present oppression" but "to explore the process of self-creation under extremely oppressive conditions," allowing us to see how individuals subjected to slavery managed to find their self-identity.

Ron Eyerman's *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001) also helps explain how slavery serves today's African-Americans as a traumatic collective memory that confers collective identity as a member of the race, a memory "that grounded the identity-formation of a people." Using Caruth's psychoanalytic theory of trauma, he argues that it is "not the experience itself that produces trauma but the remembrance of it," and that for today's writers slavery is not so much an institution or personal memory but "the collective memory . . . that defines an individual as a race member."

1.3 Historical Slave Narratives (Male). *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavo Vassa, the African* (1789) is the autobiography of an extraordinary ex-African slave who turned into a distinguished member of English society. Born in Nigeria and sold as a young child to white slave merchants, he was taken to the Americas. Equiano recollects his infancy and early childhood as a free African, but when he records his first encounters as a boy with the brutality Africans faced in the slave ships and on plantations in the Americas, we see Honneth's first kind of disrespect: Equiano's identity collapses in the loss of control over his own body. Because he had several owners and worked in many different areas of trade, Equiano had the chance to acquire practical skills in addition to literacy and knowledge of bookkeeping, eventually becoming indispensable to his masters and more knowledgeable about transatlantic trade than they. This new identity reflects the recognition he began to glimpse as at least a pretender to legal and moral rights. When in his twenties he bought his freedom and moved to England, he became a key figure in the abolitionist movement, and his autobiography was well received by the public. At this point he achieved the final stage of recognition, not just as a bearer of rights but as a person whose values (and wealth) conferred a social and professional esteem at the other extreme of eighteenth century social status.

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Douglass recounts his life as child born into slavery and separated from his family at a young age. Like Equiano his identity began to change when he learned how to read and write, and when he understood that education and knowledge would enable all slaves to regard themselves as potential bearers of rights, seeing the injustices they were subjected to. And like Equiano Douglass became a famous public figure, an orator and writer for his cause, fueling the abolitionist movement in America and arguing in particular to promote education among slaves. For he believed that only when slaves gained the full knowledge of the unnecessary cruelty they were subjected to could they become aware of the tyranny inflicted on them. Through his book, public oratory, and activism in the abolitionist cause, he won both social self-esteem and a place in history.

While we don't have original slave narratives for two other well known male slaves of the nineteenth century, Nat Turner (d. 1831) and Dred Scott (d. 1858), we can point to attempts in contemporary fiction to recreate the story of each man's struggle. William Styron's 1966 novel, *Confessions of Nat Turner*, identifies the turning point of Turner's life as his transformation from a humiliated slave into a messianic religious leader who preached armed resistance as the path to freedom. Mary Neighbour's more recent *Speak Right On: Dred Scott, A Novel* (2006) imagines that the oral storytelling skills of the African *griot* inspired Scott with the inner strength that leads him to become a doctor's apprentice and attempt the freedom that made him famous. For both men the key self-transformation occurred when they acquired a moral responsibility in the eyes of others that prompts them to demand rights and seek social acceptance for their values.

1.4 Historical Slave Narratives (Female). Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), slightly modified to appear as a work of fiction, did not have the same prestige as the works by Equiano and Douglass, perhaps because it touches the delicate subject of sexual abuse of female slaves by their male owners. Her story also risked offending conventional morality because it foregrounds her determination to escape her master's repeated attempts at controlling both her body and her will by subjecting her sexually. It also dramatizes how she reaffirms her identity as a person by exercising moral autonomy in the choice of a sexual partner, a respectable white man, with whom she has two children out of wedlock. But it's only when she becomes a mother that she undergoes the self-transformation that confers dignity, inner strength, and the will to resist slavery. As we'll see, her resistance used a unique maternal strategy that we don't find in fictional narratives about slave mothers. To protect her children, Jacobs separates herself from them through seven years of self-confinement, outwitting her master, and then fleeing North to establish herself as an autonomous person in the legal sense when she eventually recovers her children, achieves freedom for them and herself, and even enjoys the social esteem of authorship and leadership in the abolitionist movement.

Keila Grinberg's recent research has uncovered the biography of a nineteenth-century Brazilian slave, Liberata, who also suffered from sexual abuse from her owner but who used the judicial system to petition for freedom. In *Liberata: a lei da ambiguidade: Ações de liberdade da Corte de Apelação do Rio de Janeiro no século XIX* (1994), Grinberg demonstrates that masters frequently promised slaves freedom on their deathbeds or at least the ability to buy their freedom. Heirs, however, usually denied or prevented this. Liberata went to court to free herself from her owner because she was tired of being sexually abused by him and was disgusted at seeing him bury two mixed-race grandchildren aborted by his daughter. Not only does Grinberg uncover first-hand accounts of injustices suffered by slaves, but she also proves that sometimes a judicial system did work for slavery by granting slaves freedom from their owners: surprisingly, almost half of the slaves that went to court for this purpose were granted their freedom.

Another recent biography of a Brazilian female slave tries to demystify the image of the most famous eighteenth-century Brazilian woman. In *Chica da Silva e o contratador de diamantes*, Júnia Ferreira Furtado traces the history of Chica da Silva, who was born from a slave mother and a white father but who rose to fame when she became the concubine of João Fernandes de Oliveira, a Portuguese diamond contractor and one of the most influential figures in Brazil during the diamond exploitation of the eighteenth century. While many Portuguese men took women of color as concubines in regions like Minas Gerais, it's remarkable how long the relationship between Chica and João Fernandes lasted (17 years,) producing 13 children. It's even more remarkable that Chica's social status rose to the point where she was eventually buried in an all-white church in their city, Tejuco.

Since Portuguese laws did not allow interracial marriage, Chica was never officially married to João Fernandes. However, records show that he bought her with the specific intention of making her his concubine, and that as soon as the deal was made, he granted her freedom. As a result Chica adopted his last name and all their children became his legal heirs. Furtado explains how ex-slave women, once granted their freedom and the riches their partners could give them, started a process of *branqueamento* (or becoming white). Chica soon adopted all the habits of the white elite, including the acquisition of slaves. Furtado argues that in a society like this, while ex-slave did have the stigma of their color, some could acquire the riches of the whites., at

which point all they could do was try to identify themselves increasingly with that elite. Just the same, despite the money and the connections, Chica's four sons had to marry below their class due to their skin color, while all her daughters eventually married white Portuguese men. We thus see that there was some status mobility for ex-slave women in this society, but their skin color was still a stigma. We also see a very clear gender differences between the men and women who bore that skin color.

1.5 Contemporary Fiction About Slavery. In fictional narratives about African-American female slaves, mothers and daughters imitate Harriet Jacobs and use their roles as guardians of the family to fight against another of slavery's attempts to control slave bodies and deny individual identity: the dispersal of families by selling off children and prohibiting legal marriages. The very first African-American novel, William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* (1853), tells the story of a slave girl who happens to be the daughter of Thomas Jefferson. After the president's death, she is separated from her mother and sister when they are sold to different owners. She falls in love with her new owner and bears him a child, and then is sold off once again. Not only does the novel demonstrate how common were sexual relations between black women and white men, but it also reveals how light-skinned offspring like Clotel could influence the dynamics of these relationships. In her case this leads to frequent attempts and frustrations at reuniting family members, a persistent objective in many classic slave narratives.

Recent fictional narratives foreground other outcomes for slave mothers and children and return us to Keiser's and Eyerman's claims that the slave experience enables today's black writers to explore the "process of self-creation [of black identity] under extremely oppressive conditions" (Keiser 2004). In Toni Morrison's historical novel *Beloved* (1987), Sethe, just before acquiring her own freedom, murders her young daughter, Beloved, in order to spare her a life of slavery. Later, as she tries to rebuild her life with her other daughter, Denver, Sethe meets a young lady with her dead daughter's name, who she believes is indeed her Beloved. Like Jacobs novel, *Beloved* focuses on the sexual abuse of female slaves, but it also exposes the maternal strategy of infanticide and/or the abortion of the unborn as a common practice among female slaves. This kind of violence suggests that a sense of injustice can emerge within and contaminate the loving relation of mother and child. These mothers, who were themselves deprived of self-respect and an independent selfhood, cannot recognize even a hope for this in their children.

In *A Million Nightingales* (2006) Susan Straight tells the story of the slave girl Moinette, who like Clotel is also marked by her light skin color. She is the product of a rape suffered by her mother and a nameless white man; it thus becomes her mother's task to prevent a similar fate for Moinette. However, at the age of 14 the girl is sold away and begins to prepare an escape and return to her mother. While Straight echoes the familiar themes of sexual violence and abuse of female slaves in very vivid scenes, she also points to a cause of injustice that transcends race in its attempt to deny recognition of personhood : gender. Both white and black women suffer the disrespect of being traded by white men in a marriage market. Such a market is obviously not as violent as the slave market, but, in the words of Céphaline, the daughter of Moinette's new master, women are nevertheless reduced to animals. In *A Million Nightingales* the question of gender thus supersedes matters of race; and as in *Clotel*, strong and sensible maternal ties propel slaves like Moinette to face injustice and fight for their freedom.

Beverly Lowry's *Harriet Tubman: Imagining a Life* (2007) demonstrates yet a different strategy of resistance for a female African American slave. Through known historical facts, Lowry recreates scenes in the life of Tubman that made her into a legend: from her birth as Araminta Ross, to a well documented case of physical abuse as a child, to her escape from slavery as a young woman and rebirth as "Harriet Tubman." Unlike the women we've discussed so far, Tubman had no recourse to a wife's or mother's strategy to resist injustice. Instead she emerged from the collapse of her slave identity through a self-transformation into the liberator known as "Moses" and "General Tubman" in charge of the Underground Railroad during the Civil War. Tubman's reinvention of self conforms more to the sort of self-realization of an individual who achieves recognition for qualities or values society finds "unique" and "irreplaceable"—even if that society remains only an imagined, future projection (Honneth 1995: 83-87).

Part 2.1 Latin American Testimonial Novel. [Alexandra Steward did much of the research for this section]

Since the 1960s the Latin American testimonial novel has presented stories about individuals who come to identify themselves as victims of injustice when they recognize how external forces (economic, political, cultural) deprive them of dignity, self-respect and moral autonomy. These forces may be due to the poverty that results from maldistribution of wealth and power, to political oppression based on class, ethnicity or race (often though denial of basic human rights), and even to attempts at genocide. As we'll see, cognitively speaking, negative emotions like humiliation, shame, rage, indignation, or betrayal often provide the missing psychological link that motivates individuals to move from passive suffering and disrespect to active resistance (Honneth 1995: 136-38). This move toward engagement in active struggle or protest requires victims of injustice to re-identify themselves collectively, often as "marginalized" or "oppressed," but this process of re-identification is not simply a sociological phenomenon: it also implies a reconstruction of identity in the individual psyche.

2.2 Discussion of Six Novels. As a genre the Latin American testimonial novel began with *Biografía de un cimarrón* (*Biography of a Runaway Slave*), by Miguel Barnet and Esteban Montejo (1966). The narrative relates the experiences of Montejo, a former Cuban slave (b. 1860) who lived through slavery, emancipation, Cuban independence from Spain, and the socialist revolution of the 1959. An illiterate 105 year-old at the time Barnet approached him, he allowed Barnet to record his life story from several interviews they conducted together. From this template, hundreds of novels have since emerged. In what follows, we will consider six that represent a cross-section of cultures, countries, and individual experiences—some of working men and women who organize to change their lives, others of successful and unsuccessful revolutionary guerrilla movements.

In his childhood Montejo knew virtually no family life and escaped from slavery at about age 12, spending much of his teenage years as a solitary "savage" living in caves and forests. After emancipation he survived as an itinerant farm laborer who prized his personal autonomy, distrusted other people, and felt hostile toward other racial and ethnic groups. Because of his poor nurturing, he formed few long-term bonds with others; while he declared women were "the most important thing in my life," he wouldn't settle down or show interest in the children he'd fathered. But in spite of his inadequate socialization, he developed a sense of personal dignity

and honor, endorsed a need for mutual respect between individuals, and believed in “brotherhood” and “solidarity,” first among blacks and then among all poor Cubans.

Cognitively speaking, he slowly developed a sense of injustice that combined reason and emotions. He defended the war for independence on the grounds of distributive justice because “Spaniards” excluded blacks and poor whites from desirable jobs & professions, but more often he felt a sense of injustice through powerful emotions: anger at army officers and “partisans” who betrayed the revolution of 1898, at American racism in 1898, and at the hypocrisy of priests. More powerful, though, were his disgust at slavery’s chains and especially the humiliation and shame at the degraded life of “pigs” the Spanish landowners imposed on ex-slaves. This inhuman identity, according to Montejo, caused his co-workers to avoid having offspring because they despaired that these children could live truly human lives.

Elena Poniatowska’s *Hasta no verte, Jesus mio* (1969) presents the life story of Jesusa Palancares, who was born in Oaxaca and participated in the revolutionary movement there. Afterwards she moved to Mexico City, where she worked as a servant and laborer. She emerges from her narrative as a marginalized subject, born in poverty and physically abused, who nevertheless assumes the role of privileged witness and female participant in key events like the 1917 Mexican revolution. Through the corrective lens of her personal morality, she actually recreates herself as a “figure of counterauthority” who blasts popular and private misconceptions about the events, public figures, and institutions of Mexican society (see Kerr 1992: 57-59). Not unlike some of those who produced the classic slave narratives discussed in Part 1, Jesusa’s sense of injustice due to humiliation and disrespect leads her to transform herself into an author who, thanks to Paniatowska, ultimately wins social esteem from a national community that recognizes her unique qualities and values.

Two works published within a decade of one another provide a contrast between successful and unsuccessful guerilla movements. *Los subversivos* by Antonio Caso (1973) is a collection of testimonies from various members of a Brazilian urban guerrilla movement active from 1968-1970. It highlights their failed efforts to expand the revolutionary movement to a rural setting in order to defy the dictatorship and military oligarchy in Brazil that was responsible for social and economic inequalities. The work’s multiple narrators--male and female students, workers, and ex-soldiers--describe in detail their strategies for organizing students, occupying factories, and carrying out armed attacks, kidnappings, and bombings in cities like Sao Paolo and then in the countryside. But none of the narrators places these guerilla activities in relation to a personal past consisting of family, local community, education, etc. What results is an abstract account of Marxist tactics devoid of any sense of what motivated these individuals to risk their lives in a revolutionary struggle: aside from the tenets of Marxism-Leninism, we hear very little about the reasoning and emotions that persuaded them to abandon their “civilian” lives and adopt the vocation of a guerilla.

In contrast, Omar Cabezas’s *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde (Fire From the Mountain: The Making of A Sandinista)* (1982) gives voice to the memoirs of a guerrilla commander of the revolutionary Sandinista movement in Nicaragua, a movement that succeeded because its guerrilla activities began in a rural setting (like most Latin American guerrilla movements). Cabezas describes in a colloquial Nicaraguan idiom the injustices most Nicaraguans experienced under the Somoza regime (poverty and economic inequality, political

repression and infringements of human rights). This spontaneously recorded, innovative authorial voice mimics the revolution in progress and reinforces Cabezas' attempts to identify with a marginalized peasant community suffering from disrespect,. It also dramatizes his self-creation of a new identity when he articulates reasons for joining the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional in 1968 and opposing Somoza's U.S.-backed government. Because the revolution succeeded, Cabezas shows how an individual can struggle to obtain recognition from an imagined community whose expansion of rights must be projected into the future—and how this can result in the moral progress Honneth posits as the trajectory of modern history.

Another comparison of testimonial novels focuses our attention on female protagonists from Central America in the 1980s. The first is the most famous of all testimonial novels, Rigoberta Menchu's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) (*I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*). Today we recognize this narrative as either a pseudo-testimonial or as more fictive than factual because it's become clear how much of Menchu's story relied on invention or borrowings from the experiences of others (Stoll 1999 and Arias 2001). Nevertheless the work's rhetorical structure relies on a template that exploits the genre's claims to social and autobiographical authenticity. The first half of Menchú's narrative covers the period from her birth in 1959 to the moment in 1978 when she leaves her community to organize Indians to resist the takeover of their land by the combined forces of the landowning class and government troops. Menchú recalls or invents key events in the acquisition of a social consciousness, whose birth she trumpets at the precocious age of five. More dramatically, Menchú casts her first 19 years as a shuttling between two powerful experiences of community and anti-community. She portrays her family and village life as a mythological, egalitarian world that integrates and socializes each new member into roles defined by age and gender, by one's own individuality, and by inclusion in an all-embracing, nurturing moral universe. In Honneth's terms this ideal indigenous universe uses the relations of love and traditional social roles to provide recognition for everyone, including self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem.

In stark contrast to this world are the experiences Indians have when out of economic necessity they spend part of each year working on the *fincas* (coffee and sugar plantations) near the Pacific coast, or when they gather plants like *mimbre* which have a marketable value in Guatemala City. Menchú understands that this is caused by the injustice of maldistribution, and in fact she claims that her social consciousness emerges at 5 years old when she feels weak and helpless because she cannot perform wage-earning labor like her mother (34). But she communicates her sense of injustice more persuasively by describing psychological responses to these economic causes. While the details may be imagined or borrowed from reports she has heard about others, each experience records a shock of humiliation, disgust, and degradation over the denial of humanity and loss of self-esteem that then provokes a more aggressive, other-directed emotion (anger, hatred, indignation). Ultimately, by the age of 13, these intensely personal feelings of powerlessness impart a deep grief, anxiety, despair, and depression: "I drove myself mad thinking about it. I remember thinking that I couldn't go on" (88). Not unlike Montejo, she decides never to have children in order to spare them a life of such suffering (88-9).

Her narrative's novelistic structure propels her somehow to move beyond despair and to escape a premature death. Through a largely imagined episode of servitude to a rich ladino family in the capital, Menchu recovers a sense of individual competence and of moral superiority to the family's "debauched way of life" (100). Here her status subordination is reversed (at least in her

mind), and she emerges with a strong sense of self in relation to others. From this point on, she is prepared to identify injustice and its perpetrators, and at the half-way point of her narrative she has already explained how she can endure the far more brutal injustices she and her family will confront once they begin organizing the Indians to resist: her father's death in prison, her brother's murder by soldiers, and the (likely) rape and murder of her mother. Even though Menchu did not witness these events, her carefully shaped narrative establishes her newly created self as an authentic storyteller deserving recognition from wider and wider audiences because the values of her unique life match the international criteria of human rights.

Don't Be Afraid, Gringo: A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart (1987) is a testimonial novel edited by Medea Benjamin to present North American readers with the character and life of Elvia Alvarado, a rural worker in Honduras who formed part of the campesino effort to organize labor unions against the unjust working conditions of internationally based companies. In addition to illustrating the extreme poverty in Honduras, and the impact on poor Hondurans of armed struggles in neighboring countries, Alvarado's narration surpasses Menchu's in the ways it self-consciously tries to influence the gringo reader's response to the experiences it relates. More than other testimonials, Alvarado's authorial rhetoric establishes an intersubjective relation between speaker (= writer) and reader in which each relies on the other, despite their radically different social worlds, knowledge-states, forms of reasoning, and other culturally determined limits to mutual comprehension. Alvarado projects her narrative as an intensely personal one that North Americans can not only grasp but use as a motivation to act for change, to join the Honduran struggle for recognition: instead of sitting around thinking about what she tells them, Alvarado exhorts her readers, "No, we have to think and act. That's what we're doing here and that's what you have to do" (146). Honneth's theory of recognition helps us see how the testimonial's narrative rhetoric reproduces the second pattern of recognition, where an individual sees him/herself as a legal bearer of rights aware of what he/she owes others and what others owe in return. In keeping with Honneth's third pattern, Alvarado's authorial strategies also display the self-esteem of one who trusts an international community to acknowledge her unique contribution to a project of reform based on the shared values of human rights.

2.3. Critical Questions. As *testimonio* has become increasingly self-conscious about itself as a genre, and an increasingly familiar object of academic study to North American and European scholars, critics have questioned the validity of its various components. As the Literature and Justice Project continues, we'll have to consider these questions in light of our theoretical model based on recognition. For example, does *testimonio* represent the "subaltern Latin American subject" in a way that escapes appropriation and exploitation of this "peripheral" figure by the academic elites whose theories constitute the "center" of postmodern culture? Or in this transnational exchange it is inevitable that Latinamericanists repeat neocolonial strategies toward the cultural products of subaltern individuals and groups (G. Williams 1996)? Since this genre, unlike most kinds of literature, aims to provoke social change, should it be judged primarily on the basis of its social and political efficacy (Eckstein 1997)? Are its different rhetorical strategies compatible or at odds with one another (Nance 2006)? Are its readers really capable of responding positively to its persuasive call for empathy and social action (Nance 2006)? Is it legitimate for the speaker of *testimonio*, a single individual, with all her/his psychological complexity, to represent adequately the injustice of an entire group (Thompson 2000)? How confident should we be in the existence of a universal ethical community based on human rights or on explicit notions of human nature to which it appeals (Kay 1994)?

Part 3: Narratives of Exile and Immigration [Christine Matsuda did most of the research for this section]

3.1. Exile, Immigration and Trauma. Narratives of immigration and exile have contributed some of the most influential works of literature from ancient epic and lyric poetry to contemporary memoirs and novels. For our age, it's no exaggeration to claim that "the body of exile literature is inexhaustible, to the extent that many canonical literary works of the twentieth century alone were written by authors who lived in exile and who wove their exilic experiences into the fabric of their writings" (Radulescu, 2002: 21). In fact the most recent century has seen immigration and exile merge into a single, socioeconomic or politically driven condition that has become reality for an unprecedented number of people around the world. And at the same time we can expect narratives of exile and immigration to expand indefinitely as global conditions continue to necessitate the widespread displacement of populations.

In this section of the Project we will examine narratives of displacement as the record of a trauma suffered by an exile or immigrant—and its aftermath. In its most fundamental sense trauma is a wound to the body, but we are more concerned with trauma as a disordered psychic state resulting from mental, emotional, or physical injury. We will equate an individual's experience of exile or immigration with this understanding of trauma, seeing it as a disordering of the narrative coherence on which every self depends for its sense of identity and a meaningful life. Incorporating the theories of philosophers (MacIntyre 1981, Carr 1986, Taylor 1989), discourse analysts, and literary critics, we will look at narratives of exile and immigration as attempts at a narrative therapy whose goal is to restore the underlying narrative structure of a life (Melton 1998, Crossley 2000). Through these theories (especially thinkers like Taylor and G.H. Mead [(1934)]), this project of narrative therapy has strong links to Honneth's intersubjective understanding of the self. In particular it enables us to see that, if the self depends on dialogue with significant others, and with parts of its own psyche, to establish a coherent identity and ethical sense of the good, then narratives of exile and immigration may also help the narrator recreate him/herself in order to achieve recognition, rights, and inclusion in the solidarity of a new ethical community, and with these acquire self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem.

It's not yet clear how closely we can import the clinical model of narrative therapy into our literary-philosophical concern with a struggle for recognition and against experiences of disrespect, humiliation, shame, etc. We need to examine the practical experiences of humanitarian aid workers who help refugees overcome the trauma of exile to see how individuals, particularly children, suffer psychological trauma, since we'll give special attention to narratives focusing on childhood (Miserez 1998). For adults Crossley defines seven major categories that a patient should address in order to create a full, cohesive self via narrative therapy in a process that mimics how an author conceptualizes and structures a memoir or novel. Her categories include identifying transitions for key events in one's life, as well as significant people who serve as principal interlocutors, scripts for future portions of the story, pinpointing stresses, conflicts and unresolved problems that challenge the narrative, and defining the central theme that emerges from the text. (Here, for example, we can compare the therapist's role with that of the *gestor* or editor who helps transform a narrator of Latin American *testimonio* into a published author.) Or a key faculty like memory might be isolated as essential to an exile's or immigrant's ability to overcome trauma, as Zach-Blonska suggests: "The continuity of the self is established by memory. Yet the memory of an exile is constantly disrupted by the need to

‘translate’ the experience of the past in order to retrieve the self” (2002: 151). The memory one needs to recover might also be collective, that of one’s lost native community, because of its unifying ethical power: “That is why . . . the state of exile is often experienced as a loss of power, exposure, shame” (2002: 150). Another resource is MacCurdy’s (2007) recent attempt to link memory and writing through predominant themes from trauma narratives reflecting experiences with terrorism, war, and sexual abuse.

3.2 Discussion of Seven Narratives. A focus on the experience of children, and on a limited number of cultural areas, helps us propose seven works for study: three from Southeast Asia, two from Sudan, and two from the Caribbean. We can compare the stories of a female and male who survived the genocide of the Cambodian “killing fields” by examining Seng’s *Daughter of the Killing Fields: Asrei’s Story* (2005) and Yathay’s *Stay Alive, My Son* (2000). The former is the author’s memoir of childhood under the Khmer Rouge and uses the structure of family conversations, weaving quotations from each family member into episodes from the trauma of the killing fields, the refugee experience, and the transition to American life. Yathay’s memoir is more concerned with adult experience but uses the perspective of a lower social class on the genocide.

Phan’s *We Should Never Meet: Stories* (2004) connects short stories through a limited repertoire of characters, each story dealing with aspects of the Baby Lift operation at the end of the Viet Nam War. The stories are focalized by the children, their Vietnamese parents, American aid workers, and the adopting American families. Bixler’s *The Lost Boys of Sudan: An American Story of the Refugee Experience* (2005) is a journalist’s account of the experiences of three refugee boys as they try to adjust to a new life in the American South. We can compare this to Eggers’ novel *What is the What* (2006), in which, like Latin American *testimonio*, an American writer novelizes the real-life experiences of a Dinka boy who survives life in the Sudan, ten years of refugee camps in Africa, and immigrates to Atlanta, where he faces even more obstacles as he tries to integrate and acculturate himself to American society.

Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and Esmeralda’s *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1994) allow us to compare a novel and a memoir about girls who immigrate from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico to New York City. Along with Christian’s critical work, *Show and Tell: Identity as Performance in U.S. Latina/o Fiction* (1997), these two narratives open questions about how these female subjects use individual and ethnic identity formation, and political and class ideologies, to recreate senses of self.

Part Four: A Terrorist Trilogy on Injustice, Disrespect, and Recognition [Vincent Farenga did the research for this section]

4.1. Theoretical Models. The recent trilogy of novels by Algerian author Mohammed Moulessehouli (writing under the pen name Yasmina Khadra) can serve as a test case to identify the nature of injustice in three regions where, within the past fifteen years, armed conflict has led to the destruction of many lives: Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, and Iraq. The conflicts have taken the form of terrorist insurrection and revolution (the Taliban regime), suicide bombings and military reprisal (the Palestinian *intifada*), and armed invasion and terrorist insurrection (Iraq since 2003). By “nature of injustice” we mean not only an objective understanding of what

causes injustice (e.g., the clash of cultural, religious and political ideologies, global geopolitical interests; the oppression of ethnic and religious minorities and women) but also how individuals on both sides of these conflicts experience a sense of injustice and victimization.

Because these causes and experiences of injustice in all three novels appear to be multiple, Moulessehou's trilogy offers an opportunity to compare models of injustice based on objective, systematic contradictions (economic, political and cultural) to models like Honneth's and Taylor's that are based on individual experiences of disrespect and the need for recognition. Nancy Fraser's "two-dimensional perspective" in particular will help us move back and forth between systems like the economic or cultural and subjective experiences like misrecognition, enabling us to identify some types of injustice as "hybrid" (2003). What we find is that in Moulessehou's novels the protagonists experience injustice in five cognitive stages whose perceptions, rational thoughts, and emotions mix objective and subjective perspectives. (1) They first perceive themselves as victims of undeserved suffering, deprivation and subordination at the hands of powerful others. (2) These perceptions are accompanied by the emotional impact of disrespect, disgust, disorientation, or humiliation—and an inability to recognize oneself undergoing self-transformation into this abject state. (3) They experience an anger that is other-directed toward perpetrators and even those like themselves who are victims. (4) This other-directed anger then becomes self-directed when disrespect and humiliation take the form of shame. We can say that the injustice is experienced as misrecognition in an intersubjective relationship between a weakened self and a powerful other. (5) How each protagonist responds depends on the degree to which her/his self has achieved autonomy in personal identity formation, for each possesses varying levels of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. But nearly all the protagonists experience a shattering of the ego resulting in death or its psychic equivalent.

4.2. A Terrorist Trilogy. In *The Swallows of Kabul* (2002) we see stages (1) and (2) in the pitiful couple of Moshen and Zunaira, who've lost their liberal, upper-middle class life to the Taliban revolution. Moshen can hardly recognize himself in the man who helped stone to death a woman accused of prostitution, and Zunaira's fateful decision to wear the burqa in public cancels her identity, turning her into an object of "disgrace" that is neither human nor animal (78). We see stages (3) and (4) in her deepest self, where an other-directed anger toward the regime changes to self-directed anger for permitting herself to become an object of public scorn. These feelings turn to shame as she adopts the Taliban's misogynist gaze toward herself: how could she have agreed to smother herself in this garment "that annihilates her . . . constitutes her degradation and her prison . . . [with] its weight of injustice?" (98). Even though she has a rational understanding of what is happening ("the forfeiture of her rights"), she's overcome by emotionally charged images of "self-disgust" and psychic disintegration. "It's an incurable wound . . . a trauma beyond rehabilitation or therapy . . . an inner ferment . . . like a burning pyre . . . [with] its heat at the core of her being" (99).

The novel's second couple may be on the other side of the Taliban's ideological divide, but they likewise pass through these five stages. Atiq, the Taliban jailer, may help perpetrate the regime's injustice, but he suffers from an inner torment whose symptoms include irrepressible rage at inferiors, a suspicion that he is losing his humanity, and despair at his wife's terminal disease. As she wastes away, she is consumed by humiliation because she can no longer perform wifely duties. When Zunaira's destiny and Atiq's cross, he undergoes a self-transformation at the sight

of her beauty and the desire it arouses in him, but also at the injustice he is helping inflict on her. In a cruelly melodramatic and ironic twist, Moulessehouli finds a way for Atiqu's wife to transform herself into a sacrificial victim so that her husband can regain his humanity—a vision of happiness that the Taliban ideology mercilessly crushes as all four characters undergo physical death or its psychic equivalent.

The Attack (2005) focuses on a single protagonist, the Palestinian Israeli surgeon Amine, whose life disintegrates when he learns that his Palestinian wife was the perpetrator of a suicide bombing whose victims he is treating in his hospital's ER. At first, in stages (1) and (2), he cannot accept the loss of a perfect spouse who never displayed any commitment to the *intifada*; and he loses all sense of his past identity. Slowly his anger toward the terrorist cause turns inward (stage [3]) in a self-destructive rage, but here he experiences shame for his past refusal to acknowledge the humiliation the Palestinians have suffered. But as he persists in his quest to understand his wife's motives for her self-sacrifice, the terrorists victimize him in turn, dramatically indoctrinating him into the core Palestinian experiences of humiliation, loss of dignity, and powerlessness (stage [4]). Ultimately Amine emerges reborn, connected to his people for the first time, sharing with them the self-respect and self-esteem that characterize the solidarity of a community whose members intersubjectively provide one another mutual recognition (stage 5).

In *The Sirens of Baghdad* (2006) Moulessehouli further narrows his inquiry to explore the making of a terrorist "insurgent" in Iraq under the American occupation. His nameless protagonist, about 20 years old, inhabits an idyllic Bedouin village in the Iraqi hinterland, a world with no experience of genuine injustice and whose uneducated population remains, after 2003, ideologically confused over the fall of Saddam, the American invasion, and the larger question of Arab sovereignty vis-à-vis the West. But soon, as the American presence reaches this backwater community, the young protagonist enters into a prolonged experience with stages (1) and (2): GIs ruthlessly kill an innocent, mentally handicapped youth, bomb a wedding party, and finally invade the young man's home, humiliating his invalid father. Feelings of powerlessness quickly yield to shock, disgust, and empathy for the victims, but anger and the need to revenge family honor finally dominate (stage 3) when the protagonist realizes he must undergo a self-transformation. He must abandon his gentle, non-violent nature, leave his village, and liberate himself from submission to all authority, including that of his family and cultural traditions. Fleeing to Baghdad, overcome with hatred but also an inability to find any self-worth within himself (stage 4), he remains paralyzed by the "unjust life" around him. Slowly he gains the confidence of a terrorist cell, proves an easy recruit, and finally sense a new life begin when he participates in his first violent act.

It is this sense of worthlessness and powerlessness that motivates the young man to volunteer for a suicide bombing so that he can "recover my self-esteem" and "recover my soul." But his mission turns out to be far more destructive, one of apocalyptic dimensions: the delivery within his own body of an ultimate biological weapon against the West. On the eve of the event, through the hazy confusion of ideological arguments about the conflicting strategies Arabs might take toward the West, the protagonist uses his own moral compass to make his decision (stage 5). Without any genuine, inner rational deliberation, but because he intuitively understands that a common human fate embraces all peoples in all cultures, a universalist sense of justice causes him to abort his mission, sacrificing his own life to this "cause." This final gesture of his affirms

a solidarity that transcends systems that are ethnic, religious, economic or political--and that confers recognition and self-esteem on all who acknowledge human dignity in one another.

Part 5: Looking Ahead to 08-09

In 07-08 most of our efforts were devoted to examining primary narratives in each of our 4 major genres and to identifying persistent themes and useful theoretical models. It's clear that not all of the narratives discussed in this report will be suitable for one book-length study, so we will need to engage in more detailed readings in order to test and select the most suitable primary materials. This is especially true for the sections on *testimonio* and the literature of exile and immigration. We will also need to further refine the major themes and models that a book can accommodate.

At the same time we will continue to seek out new primary texts--narratives within the genres we've already identified as well as materials from other sources. We may also wish to include narratives of injustice from historical experiences that are not represented in the materials described above (e.g., the Holocaust). Some of these new materials will no doubt reflect the interests of new research associates who join the Project.

We will also be expanding our biweekly meetings and discussions to include any interested faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates. In this way we hope to encourage others to suggest materials and topics for the Project to incorporate.

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