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**An Exploration of the Social Effectiveness of Political  
Kidnapping Testimonios in Colombia**

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# An Exploration of the Social Effectiveness of Political Kidnapping Testimonios in Colombia

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## ABSTRACT

The social destruction resulting from seven-decades of armed conflict places Colombia among the top countries in human rights violations in the Americas. Advocates for kidnapping victims in Colombia believe that survival stories or *testimonios* present a possibility for generating social awareness in the general society that could lead to social change. Through textual analysis, tracing the circulation of three *testimonios*, and interviews with Colombian university students and members of NGOs, this paper explores whether *testimonios* produced in the Colombian context by political elites and victims of kidnapping serve as vehicles to increase social awareness. Initial interviews reveal that though there is a perceived need to raise social awareness about the plight of the victims of the armed conflict; *testimonios* by former politicians who were kidnapped are not considered effective tools to instigate social change because these *testimonios* are perceived as commercial endeavors in service of political agendas.

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## INTRODUCTION

On July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2008, after six years of being kidnapped by the FARC (Colombia's largest guerrilla group), Ingrid Betancourt (former presidential candidate) and fourteen other captives were rescued during a movie-like military intelligence operation called Operación Jaque ("operation check"). Using red-cross international symbols, the Colombian military flew a helicopter into the jungle to impersonate the red-cross, who was allegedly transporting a group of captives to a FARC's camp for a prisoner exchange. Once FARC had loaded the captives onto the helicopter with a couple of its members, the Colombian soldiers overtook the guerrilleros and flew away to a safe zone. The news about this rescue mission made international headlines.

The kidnapping story and aftermath controversies of Ingrid Betancourt, who is of French and Colombian nationality, have received extraordinary international media attention. A few days after her rescue, Nicolas Sarkozy (the primer minister of France until 2012) awarded Betancourt France's highest award, the Legion of Honor. Internationally, Betancourt has been perceived as a heroin, a survivor of great tenacity. She appeared on Larry King Live and the Oprah Winfrey show. Oprah referred to Betancourt as "the bravest mom in the world" and chose her testimony for the Oprah Book Club. At the national level, Betancourt's life and testimony have become object of public scrutiny and generated a soaring number of commentaries in the national media. Two years after her rescue, Betancourt and her family filed a request for conciliation to the Colombian Attorney General's Office demanding from the Colombian state close to seven million US Dollars in compensation for psychological damages and an amount equivalent to her senatorial salary during the six years of her captivity. The newspaper *El Tiempo* reported on its website that only after one hour of being released, this news had been read by more than 8,500 people and had more than 100 comments (Quintero 2010). Reactions to this news range from profound respect and admiration to despicable insults towards Betancourt and her family. The following comments come from online readers of *El Tiempo.com* as reported by Quintero (2010):

Comment by online reader "mabet":

The Colombian government should sue Ingrid instead and charge her for the cost of her rescue. Let's not forget that it was due to her own stupidity that she was kidnapped. She did not listen to the many warnings that the different functionaries of the state gave her.

Comment by online reader "yardahel":

How can she be so stupid? She was the one who basically turned in herself to the FARC. It is [the kidnapping] her own fault for being such an idiot. And now what? If she doesn't get what she is asking for she is going to start talking bad about Colombia? She should sue the FARC; they were the ones who kidnapped her.

In comparison, the following two online comments expresses support for Betancourt. Online reader "Danytravieso" states:

It is correct that she sues the state and the military because they have the constitutional obligation to protect all citizens and specially to protect presidential candidates... the state was negligent in this respect... but I also think she should sue the FARC.

The following are excerpts from a letter to the editor published in ElTiempo.com, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010, by an anonymous author:

After her liberation, I felt great admiration due to her composure and intelligence... I told my friends that there was a difference between the Ingrid before and after Operación Jaque. However, after she tried to sue the state for an astronomical amount, I felt disappointed again, just like she disappointed all Colombians. I was able to close this cycle of love and hate after reading her book... This book shows the strength of the testimonio. I devoured its 700 pages. Reading her book signifies my reconciliation with Ingrid. All Colombians should read it... Her book describes with much detail the multiple subtle and explicit humiliations done by the FARC... However, in the midst of so much brutality, her book reveals human strength. It is a tribute to life itself.

These conflicting reactions at the national level were echoed in the comments of the people I interviewed. For example, as I listened to the students of a Colombian university talk about the testimonios of victims of the conflict, it was most noticeable the divisive and conflicting reactions that testimonios written by political figures stirred among them. Despite the core reality that all testimonios are political documents, those who I interviewed differentiated between testimonios of ex-politicians and those narrated or written by “true” victims. Although, in general, kidnapped ex-politicians were regarded as victims of the brutality of the conflict, their testimonios were not valued as “pure” or “authentic” testimonios but seen more as political tools. This paradoxical relationship between testimonios and politics is illustrated by the following statement provided during a focus group: “I feel like we could holistically understand the conflict if we listen to the stories of people who experience it on a daily basis, in places where the armed conflict is always present, not just the stories of people who have been kidnapped even though it is very sad that they were captive” (Participant #2, Focus Group-#2, July 12th, 2011). This paper looks at the paradoxical relationship between written testimonios and politics in the Colombian context.

The recent marches for peace held in April 2013 in Colombia demonstrate the consensus among the Colombian general public, the longing for peace. Gustavo Petro, Bogotá’s mayor addressed thousands of participants in the capital’s march by telling them that the marches are the start of a new revolution: “a revolution of forgiveness” (Portal Bogotá). However, despite the multiple attempts of the national government engaging different armed groups in peace negotiations, the nation is still at war with more than five million internally displaced people (IDMC 2011) and a gruesome human rights record (Human Rights Watch 2001).

It is only fair to ask, how a nation that has endured six decades of war can build a community of forgiveness? In her analysis of the politics of violence in the aftermath of 9/11, author Judith Butler offers a possible route to ending the cycle of violence through an ethics of non-violence and peace based on humans’ interdependent vulnerability as the basis for justice (Butler 2004). Butler points out that the subject (i.e. the individual or the nation-state) is constituted in relation to others; it does not exist in a social and historical vacuum. Therefore, the ability to recognize and accept other’s suffering as suffering and our own acts of violence as aggressive acts could be

the start of a transformation towards a more responsible and just global community and a less circumscribed public opinion sphere. Through this research I ask, are Colombians willing to recognize all acts of violence as violence and accept testimonios of ex-politicians as narratives of suffering and valid view points of the national conflict? Behar invites us to reflect on our common humanity through testimonio narratives: “We cannot live without stories. Our need for stories of our lives is so huge, so intense, so fundamental, that we could lose our humanity if we stopped trying to tell stories of who we are. And even more important, if we stopped wanting to listen to each other’s stories” (Behar 2003:xix).

Testimonios have been described as narratives of trauma that (1) tell the story of an individual who has suffered tremendous physical and/or psychological trauma caused by social injustice and/or human rights violations, (2) give voice to a marginalized group of people who have suffered or are suffering in similar ways, and (3) intend to provoke readers to actively respond against the social injustice and human rights violations described by the narrators (Nance 2006). Despite the above comprehensive and seemingly uncontroversial description of testimonios, this paper explores the mixed reactions that testimonios yield, pointing to the complicated politics of such documents.

Some testimonio literary criticism has revolved around issues of the veracity of events, authorship, the power dynamics between the narrator and the writer, and representation of the subaltern (Gelles 1998; Gugelberg 1991 and 1996; Stoll 1997). Yet, others have written extensively on the issues of identity formation among the narrators and the readers of testimonios (Yúdice 1991), and the textual elements that could spur readers’ actions against human rights violations and social injustice (Nance 2006). This preliminary research identifies other factors, besides textual elements, that could prevent readers from realizing the social project of testimonios. Can we expect that testimonios of kidnappings in the Colombian context necessarily serve as therapeutic vehicles for the construction of a society that can restore individual and social trust? In other words, if a testimonio written by an ex-politician possess adequate textual elements, as identified by Nance (2006), will potential readers find such testimonios socially effective?

The social effectiveness of testimonios has been described as a challenge to the status quo through a call to action (Beverly 1993); the intention of the writer towards obtaining concrete social changes through his/her narrative (Nance 2006); and a type of transformative influence on the lives of the audiences of autobiographical narratives (Oakdale 2005). In sum, social effectiveness of testimonios refers to the ability of a narrative to influence the reader to respond to the narrative through actions meant to promote change in society. Such actions could include volunteering for an NGO organization, signing an online petition or letter, making phone calls to public officials on behalf of victims, and attending educational or informational events such as lectures and panels about a social injustice topic. However, before social change actions can take place, we must look at whether testimonios are being read or heard by potential audiences. Ingrid Betancourt’s testimonio has been successful among international audiences in Europe and the U.S. (as it has been translated into multiple languages such as English and French and it is available as an audio-book and e-book through websites such as Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble), but there is not much information regarding whether this type of testimonio is being read by Colombians and what factors are influencing potential readers towards or against reading testimonios. In this paper, social effectiveness also refers to the receptiveness of potential audiences to reading and/or hearing testimonios.

Preliminary interviews with Colombian individuals show that in general testimonios told by victims of the conflict are perceived as a way to increase solidarity and social understanding in the context of the internal war. However, the testimonios of kidnapped ex-politicians, despite the fact that they experienced excruciating circumstances during their captivity, are not regarded as effective in reaching and educating the public about the causes and consequences of the armed conflict and of social injustices in the country. My preliminary research suggests that the readers' perception about the testimonio's author may truncate the potential for effective social change usually attributed to this genre.

The purpose of this paper is not to provide a full ethnographic treatment of testimonios and their social effects. Rather, I identify new research possibilities and raise important questions within the study of testimonio literature and social change in the context of internal conflict.

This paper is organized into five sections as follows: The first section "Kidnappings in Colombia" provides a brief history of the social phenomena and kidnapping statistics in Colombia in the last decade in order to contextualize this crime as a social phenomena, not an isolated crime, that affects many sectors of the Colombian population. Second, the section "Testimonio Literature in Latin America" provides a literature review of the main themes of the literary criticism surrounding the genre of testimonio such as themes of authenticity and authorship, veracity of events, production conditions, and textual elements. In the next two sections, I present the results of preliminary interviews with Colombian NGOs (section three) and Colombian college students (section four) regarding their perception of testimonios written by ex-politicians. These data suggest that the social effectiveness of testimonios written specifically by ex-politicians is minimal. Finally, I summarize my findings and identify possible directions for future research within the testimonio literature and studies of social change, peace and reconciliation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The data collection for this paper was conducted during the months of June and July of 2011 in Bogotá, Colombia and was funded by a field research grant from the Latin American and Iberian Institute at the University of New Mexico and the Tinker Foundation. I conducted four focus groups with six to eight university students. Each focus group lasted between 90 minutes to 120 minutes. Focus group participants were recruited either by an announcement in the newsletter of a youth NGO or an email announcement to a freshmen class at the Universidad El Bosque in Bogotá, Colombia. Additionally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six representatives from different human rights NGOs in Bogotá. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. All participants were assigned study code numbers which they used during the recording of their sessions and their consent forms. All personal and organizational identifiers were destroyed and the participants' names are kept anonymous due to the confidentiality agreement. The study had a total of 30 participants: 14 males and 16 females. All data was collected in Spanish and translations of interviews and book quotes are mine, therefore any mistakes are my sole responsibility.

## **KIDNAPPING IN COLOMBIA**

A recent publication by the independent organization Latin America Working Group U.S. Office on Colombia reported a total of 51,000 disappeared people over the last ten years (LAWG 2010:17). This statistic includes the number of people kidnapped by the guerrilla and paramilitary groups, as well as victims of forced disappearance by the Colombian state. Violence

in Colombia takes many forms, however the high number of kidnappings in the last decade gained Colombia the title of the “kidnapping capital of the world” (BBC News). With a population of approximately 45 million people, more than 50% of the world’s annual kidnappings take place in Colombia (Tate 2007). Kidnappings in Colombia are not isolated crimes; the United Nations International Law Commission categorizes this Colombian phenomenon as a crime against humanity (Nizkor 2007), which takes place within a framework of national violence, corruption, and impunity.

In Colombia, kidnapping crimes have mainly been perpetrated by guerrilla groups that have participated in the armed conflict since the sixties, and to a lesser extent by the paramilitary groups and urban unorganized crime entities. In the seventies, civilian abductions in Colombia developed as a political tool. At that time the M-19 guerrilla group (now extinct) carried out most of the kidnappings in order to increase its political influence. During the eighties, the abductions were mostly related to drug-trafficking and were committed by the guerrilla groups FARC and the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), who targeted family members of drug traffickers to drive them out of the rural areas where cultivation of illicit crops was taking place. In addition, drug traffickers who were not associated with guerrilla groups carried out abductions of politicians and their family members in order to persuade the government against extradition laws for drug-trafficking crimes. Throughout the eighties and nineties, the statistics regarding abductions increased steadily. The highest number of abductions registered took place in the year 2000 with a record of 3,572 cases (IKV Pax Christi 2008). Since 2001, abduction cases have decreased, which has been attributed to the Política de Seguridad Nacional, a national security policy implemented during the administration of Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010). This national security policy was developed with the aim to “deny sanctuary to illegally armed groups, increase the state presence in the Colombian territory, and destroy the illegal drug trade which financed the guerrilla groups and generated corruption and crime” (ICG 2003).

From 1996 to 2006, there was a total of 23,356 kidnappings registered at the national level, of which approximately 30% were attributed to the FARC, 23% to ELN, 16% to unorganized crime, and 5% to paramilitary groups. The main sectors of the population who were victims of abductions in the same period were business people (2,772), minors (2,551), cattle ranchers and big farmers (1,739), state employees (1,506), and public servants (1,051) (FPL 2007:27). However, more recently, despite the commonly held belief that “kidnappings only happen to the elite Colombian class”, the Director of a leading Colombian NGO in advocacy and direct services to kidnapping victims, states that more and more cases of abductions are targeted to the middle class population (Interviewee #1, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

In Colombia, there are two main types of kidnappings, economic and political. The economic kidnapping has several local versions that vary according to the time of captivity, place and form of abduction, and number of people kidnapped at once. Several types of abduction have earned names in popular discourse, for example: “paseo millonario”, “pescas milagrosas”, “express kidnapping”, and “virtual abduction” (FPL 2007; IKV PAX Christi 2008:25-26). Political kidnappings (mainly of politicians, police and military officers and soldiers) are carried out by the guerrilla groups and used to carry out negotiations with the state.

A representative of a leading NGO that specializes in the issue of kidnapping in Colombia acknowledges that although this crime still takes place in the country, there have been many accomplishments that NGOs have gained in other fronts. For example, Colombians have changed their attitude regarding kidnappings from apathy or ignorance toward understanding it

within an ethical and political framework to the point that many citizens have participated in public protests against kidnappings. Interviewee #1 states:

We have been able to place the issues surrounding kidnappings in the public agenda through new laws, advocacy and public awareness. People are now moved to go out to the streets in protest against human suffering. I think we have a country with more solidarity; a country that repudiates kidnappings, that does not like to be kidnapped. This is a clear value among all Colombians nowadays (Interviewee #1, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

However, despite the recent decrease of kidnappings and a change in attitude toward the crime among the citizens, Colombia is still among the top ten countries in the world where kidnappings take place on a daily basis and about 30% of all these abductions are not reported for fear of repercussion against family members (IKV PAX Christi 2008:30).

In the last decade, Colombia's civil society organizations dedicated to promoting and defending human rights have increased in terms of both quantity and impact (Aguilera 2008:32). Some of these organizations provide psychological and legal support to victims of abduction and their families, as well as conduct social awareness campaigns and research on this national problem. The national government has responded to the kidnapping situation by creating judicial offices and some support and prevention programs. However, victim advocates, human rights activists, and academics consider that these programs do not acknowledge the myriad of psychological, social, and economic effects endured by the victims, their families, and the society as a whole, which is a key point and precondition for the healing process of an individual and a society that should be part of any peace policy (Aguilar 2003; Meluk 1998; Aristizábal 2000).

### **TESTIMONIO LITERATURE IN LATIN AMERICA**

Witnessing literature, the testimonio genre, in Latin America dates to the 1960s national liberation movements. By far one of the most known testimonios from Latin America is *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así me Nació la Conciencia* (1983) which was published in English in 1984 under the title *I Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. This testimonio has a great significance not only because it brought international attention to the human rights violations in Guatemala but also because of the polemic surrounding the authenticity and authorship of the testimonio as well as the role of anthropologists in the production of testimonios (Gelles 1998).

Earlier academic studies focus on defining what constitutes the genre of testimonio and who are its main participants. Testimonios are defined as first person accounts usually told by people located at the margins of society, which narrate stories of social injustice and violence representative of a social class, and have the intent of producing a societal outcome to change such conditions of injustice (Nance 2006:2).

Traditionally narrated by people who are excluded from the main stream institutions, people who might not be literate in the dominant language, the testimonialista, or experiencing/witnessing narrator, typically uses an interlocutor that is usually a professional such as an anthropologist, professional writer, or journalist (Beverly 1989). Known examples of this practice are: *Biografía de un Cimarrón* (1966) written by anthropologist Esteban Montejo, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* (1983) written by anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos, and *Translated Woman* (1993) written by anthropologist Ruth Behar.



However, in the last decades testimonios also include stories narrated by people from an elite group in society regarding an experience of social injustice that are aimed to challenge the status quo through an urgent call to action (Beverly 1993). This is the case of the contemporary Colombian kidnapping survival testimonios referred to in this paper. At the time of their kidnapping the three authors, Ingrid Betancourt, Eladio Pérez, and Clara Rojas, were part of the Colombian political elite and their political status was central to the direction and planning of the national agenda, evidenced by the fact that Betancourt and Pérez held public office and Rojas was working in Betancourt's presidential campaign. Nevertheless, it is important to note that at the time of writing their testimonios, the narrators did it from outside the political system, as they no longer held public office. Regarding the use of interlocutors, although Pérez' testimonio is an "as-told-to" account to a renowned Colombian journalist, Pérez does not necessarily require an interlocutor due to lack of literacy. Although, the other two books use editors, they are not mentioned and are not credited as having a role in the writing process and in the case of Rojas and Betancourt, both narrators had published books prior to their abduction testimonios.

As mentioned earlier testimonio criticism has focused on authenticity of authorship and events, the narrator-writer relationship and representation. However, here I focus on Gelles (1998) and Nance's (2006) critique of the tendency to view the testimonio genre as a "pure" and "spontaneous" narrative and bring attention to the mediated character of testimonios. Nance (2006) states that testimonio is "simultaneously political and literary": "The fact that the project takes place through a medium that at least has the hallmarks of literature cannot be ignored, but neither can the fact that literature here is instrumental. For these speakers, the goal is not only to produce books; they are after concrete social change" (2006:11-12). Regarding the motivation for writing *Cautiva: Testimonio de un Secuestro*, Clara Rojas echoes the fusion of the literary and the political:

I write it from the deepest part of my heart moved by multiple reasons. First, I have always wanted to write a book. I have written a few about academic and professional topics, but this is an opportunity to open my heart and soul and enter in a field that I have always loved, that of literature. Also, I am motivated to write my testimonio so that it is left for my child and the new generations that he will represent; because I wish to live in a country where forgiveness, reconciliation, tolerance, development, and peace are the norm. Lastly, I tell my story to bring the readers closer to my experience and help them understand the challenges that I confronted and overcame, and to leave a mark on their hearts. (Rojas 2009:2)

Furthermore, in a review of Stoll's criticism of Rigoberta Menchu for not being an honest retelling of Menchú's life events, anthropologist Paul Gelles describes the importance of recognizing the nature of the construction process of a testimonio narrative:

Testimonies are coauthored texts whose production depends on a complex, heavily mediated, collaborative process. *I Rigoberta Menchu* is no exception. Thus while the words and witnessing are those of Menchu herself, they are mediated by her relationship with her interlocutor and by the recording, transcribing and editing processes. (Gelles 1998:16)

Yet, others have written extensively on the issues of identity formation among the narrators and the readers of testimonios arguing that through the telling of their story, a testimonialista not only

tells a personal story that is shared by others in a community, but also performs an “act of identity formation” which is simultaneously personal and collective (Yúdice 1991). In other words, through the sharing of individual sensations, thoughts, fears, and life experiences in a testimonio the narrator engages in a process of re-construction of identity and identification, which takes place at both the individual and the collective levels, as a survivor of a kidnapping in the Colombian context. In this way, Betancourt, Pérez, and Rojas’ narratives could be considered contributions to processes of identification of survivors with a Colombian society that repudiates kidnappings and the potential readers of their testimonios whom might be transformed from passive readers to actors in the struggle against human rights violations.

Oakdale (2005) looks at the transformative influence of autobiographical ritual narratives on the audience’s lives, a narrative effect called “cosubstantiality” (Kenneth Burke cited in Oakdale 2005:7). Similarly, testimonios could foster a process of identification between the narrator and the readers and result in individuals acting on their beliefs, changing their lives and the lives of those affected by social injustice and human rights abuses. Beverly describes the process of identification in testimonios as a “complicity” established between the readers and the testimonialista, which happens when the testimonio engages the readers’ ethics and justice standards and the readers find themselves in a speech- act situation that requires response.

Nance (2006) dismantles the traditional notion of testimonio as a “pure account of events” solely narrated by the witness of the events. Nance’s main interest is to go beyond discussions of conditions of production and rather discern the textual elements of the testimonio that lead readers into social action based on their ethical beliefs, on the one hand, or cause readers to erect psychological defenses and/or rationalizations that inhibit social action. Nance identifies various textual elements that are very influential in the testimonios’ “social project” (2006:72). She adds, “testimonio is not a matter of speaking of one’s suffering for therapeutic, archival, or judicial purposes, but rather of speaking of one’s suffering in such a way that readers will be induced to act against the injustice of it” (2006:90). However, she cautions that there are certain textual elements that could trigger certain type of readers’ reaction denominated “psychological defenses” which enable the readers to still preserve their belief in a just world, but not feel compelled to act on their belief (2006:67-72). To meet requirements that spur readers to action, testimonios must explicitly state events that took place during their experience of violence or injustice and counter official denials such as those from government sources, and present injustice as potentially avoidable. Victims also must demonstrate a balance of positive character traits, respond to suffering in ways that readers imagine they themselves might behave in the same circumstance, and avoid representing the narrator as a mythical hero who always knows what to do or who is the brightest or most oppressed (2006:73-79).

Several of these textual elements are present in Betancourt’s kidnapping testimonio. First, early on her account in chapter 2, Betancourt narrates her version of a controversial point in her kidnap. The official government sources, the media, and also public opinion, have asserted that Betancourt was the main cause of her kidnapping. As soon as it was known that Betancourt was kidnapped, the government stated that many officials had cautioned her about not taking the trip to San Juan del Caguan because it was a dangerous zone, and that Betancourt was reckless and made the trip anyway. Betancourt, in an effort to counter the government’s official statement, dedicates an entire chapter to describe in detail the different government officials she talked to and what they told her and the different facts on which she based her decision. For example, she tells that the then president Andrés Pastrana took away all her security personnel but all the people in the airport told her it was moderately safe to do the trip and that the media prior to her

trip had been covering the government's strong presence, and presumably control, in the region. In other words, she made her decision based on false information that was given to her by the president's office. Betancourt provides explicit details of the events that took place before her kidnapping in order to prove that an injustice occurred, confirm that specific events actually happened, and at the same time counter the official denials of events.

Second, one of the most distinguishing aspects of Betancourt's testimonio is the meticulous description of her many failed attempts to escape from captivity. These are clear examples of moments of confusion and indecision where the reader could identify with the narrator, and in certain moments think that the decision was risky and scary but under the circumstances of the story the reader would do the same. This aspect according to Nance (2006) is an attempt to avoid mythologizing of the speaker and create identification between the narrator and the reader. The following is an excerpt from an account of a moment when Betancourt is in the process of actualizing her escape, which she and Rojas had been planning for weeks. This moment of self-reflection and indecision is described in three pages before she makes the decision to get out of the cage in which she was being held captive:

I threw my small backpack outside. My hands got totally wet. I knew that we would have to spend several days wet up to our necks, and that felt repulsive. I got so mad with myself that the thought of losing a small comfort was going to be the obstacle to my struggle for freedom. I thought it was ridiculous to waste so much time trying to convince myself that if I escaped I was not going to get sick and that my skin was not going to break out after being in the jungle for three days without any protection. I thought to myself that my life had been too easy, and that I was conditioned by an education in which taking precautions was a strategy to hide one's fear. The fears that I had to overcome were growing with all types of excuses. My first attempt to escape had failed because I was afraid of dying of thirst or drinking stagnated water from a puddle. (Betancourt 2010:21, my translation)

In sum, Betancourt's testimonio includes many of the textual elements identified by Nance (2006) as precursors of readers' actions against human rights violations and social injustice such as countering the government's version of the events prior to her kidnapping and describing herself as a "regular" person, a delicate balance of a person who feels confused, afraid, but is also courageous under horrifying circumstances.

### **HUMAN RIGHTS NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND TESTIMONIOS**

Despite the unresolved academic discussion of the testimonio's authenticity, the social and power dynamics of its production, and its textual elements, grassroots organizations and social service providers believe in these narratives' presumed social impact and continue to use them in their victim advocacy efforts. Testimonios have been important in maintaining and developing the practice of human rights and solidarity movements (Beverley 1993; Tate 2007). Writing about the paradigm of transformative witnessing literature in human rights activism in the U.S., anthropologist Winifred Tate in her book *Counting the Dead: The Culture and Politics of Human Rights Activism in Colombia* states the following about the testimonio genre:

It relies on the assumption that witnessing results in understanding and requires response. In this paradigm, the revelation of the unknown acts upon us, and the changes wrought by knowledge require action. Knowledge transforms both our internal selves and our relations in the world and brings with it responsibility to bear witness to that knowledge in the world and take action. (Tate 2007:9)

Testimonio narratives must call for action in order for social reconstruction to take place. As Charles Villa-Vicencio, Research Director of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, comments:

Reconciliation is facilitated, inter alia, by telling one another stories, as a basis for getting to know the other – for understanding the nature of their suffering and their aspirations. It has to do with uncovering the ‘motives and perspectives’. Storytelling is a central part of the Commission. And yet, it will take a damn side more than that to heal the nation. Healing depends to a significant extent on how we respond to those stories” (Andrews 2003:47).

In Colombia, psychologists and academics have pointed out that the effects of traumatic events such as those resulting from kidnappings go beyond the victims; they extend to their families and the Colombian society as a whole. In this context, testimonios are considered integral to the acknowledgement and healing process for individual and social reconstruction after traumatic and violent events (Aguilera 2008; Agudelo 2000; Aristizábal 2000; Jimeno 2007; Meluk 1998). Acts of political violence are traumatic and affect social cohesion by breaking trust among members of society. In order to repair such situations the social reconstruction process should integrate the individual, family and social traumatic experiences into a plan for peace and citizenship that encourages all forms of expression (Aguilera 2008; Jimeno 2007).

Due to the prolonged nature and worsening of the internal armed conflict in Colombia over seven decades, many nongovernmental organizations continue to rely on victim testimonios in order to increase awareness at the national and international levels about the country’s human rights crisis. Such is the case of one NGO I spoke with, which keeps an archival currently containing 100 volumes of compiled kidnapping testimonios and statistics since 1991. Other organizations have based their human rights violations databanks on the testimonios of victims collected throughout the country (Interviewee #2 July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011). The Communications Director at NGO #1 states:

The testimonios of victims of kidnappings are very important because they are a tool that serves to bring awareness and influence public opinion regarding the absurdity of such crime. Only through accessing real life stories, through listening the victims or reading their testimonio, we could arrive to an understanding of the depth of the personal drama of a person who has been deprived of his/her freedom. (Interviewee #3, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

NGOs use testimonios as a tool to give visibility to the impunity surrounding the crimes against humanity committed in the country and to give a voice to those who are not represented in the mass media. The following is a quote by interviewee #4 who works at a human rights and social justice NGO regarding the utility of testimonios in their efforts:

This is a strategy to give visibility to the issues and the real causes of problems such as displacement of populations. It is necessary that all people have access to an alternative story about what is taking place in the county. It is important that people know this directly from the victims. This is what we call visibility, we use printed text, radio, and videos to do it, and it is something we have been doing since the beginning of our organization. (Interviewee #4, July 11th, 2011)

Furthermore for this NGO, testimonios are not only a strategy of activism but constitute an “ethic of work”, a way of working that recognizes that marginalized people have an active role in their own process of justice and reparation. Interviewee #4 explains:

Since 1997, in our website we keep the historical record of the events that take place and we share them with the Ministry of Justice, the Office of the President, the Minister of Agriculture, the District Attorneys Office (in Colombia this office is represented by two offices: Fiscalia and Procuraduria). We file a formal report with the testimonios of people in all of these offices so that there is sufficient evidence to start an investigation. The reports have many details like specific names, places, and times of events. At the end of each report we request that an investigation gets underway to capture the implicated paramilitaries. (Interviewee #4 July 11th, 2011)

Testimonios have many purposes and great significance for organizations working towards conflict resolution and peace initiatives as well. Interviewee #2, director of a Mennonite NGO states that collecting, recording, and listening to testimonios is the basis of their popular education methodology and their increased ability to influence the government to protect victims. Interviewee #2 explains:

The pressure that we as an organization can have in the government institution has to be supported with evidence and we do this through the people’s testimonios. In our case, this is a fundamental tool for lobbying and to influence the government. We use the testimonios in our annual publication in which we talk about serious violations of human rights committed by all the armed groups. We use this evidence to be more effective as interlocutors, to file legal complaints, and to demand rights. (Interviewee #2, July 8th, 2011)

As it can be seen in the above quotes, many Colombian organizations rely on testimonios to provide support for their advocacy, reports and methodologies. However, they mostly use testimonios from “marginalized” people as opposed to testimonios from public figures like Betancourt, Pérez, and Rojas.

Statements by NGO representatives interviewed for this paper echo the testimonio literature that credits these narratives with the potential for social change. Yet some have raised the question of whether all victims of social injustice and human rights violations have equal access to venues for the sharing of their testimonios. Colombian anthropologist Alejandro Castillejo-Cuellar states that there are limitations to the sharing of victim testimonios especially when the state is the perpetrator of the crimes (Castillejo-Cuellar 2009). Yet the creation of collective memory with the recognition of the uniqueness of the individual drama is considered an integral

part of reconstructing collective memory, trust, and creating social links that can lead to change (Aguilera 2008; Jimeno 2007; Yudice 1991).

### **READERS' PERSPECTIVES**

This section of the paper discusses how the readers' perspectives about the authors of the testimonios affect their appreciation of the testimonio. It is evident from the interviews with NGOs and focus groups that potential readers make a distinction between testimonios written or narrated by "marginalized" individuals and those authored by ex-politicians.

Despite having several textual elements that contribute to the identification necessary for social action on the part of the reader as described by Nance (2006), there exists the question of if Colombians would read Betancourt, Perez and Rojas' testimonios in the first place and if they do how much resistance would they bring to identifying with the literary characters. Much controversy has surrounded Betancourt's abduction, concerning her personality and her political agenda motivations. Editorials in *El Tiempo*, Colombia's newspaper with the largest national distribution, reveal the conflicting sentiments in the public's opinion that potential readers must struggle with before they read testimonios by ex-politicians such as Ingrid Betancourt's testimonio. For example:

(1) Comment by *El Tiempo* reader Maria Isabel Rueda, September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010:

I will read Ingrid. That a Colombian goes through the trouble of writing a book, even if it is for profit, and describes all her experiences about her abduction in this country, and in response Colombians think they have the right to say "we won't read it, the French should read it" because we don't like the woman writer, that is despicable. That is a mean act. Let us not forget that she was the one who was kidnapped. Not reading it would be a stupid act.

(2) Comment by *El Tiempo* reader Yolanda Reyes, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010:

Even though it is impossible to subtract all the publicity around Ingrid Betancourt's book, I tried to read it as a child would read a book, without regard for the criticism about the author. Of course this is not easy to do, but I thought Ingrid deserved the same respects afforded to any other author, that once her book is out, people judge it on its own terms.

(3) Comment by *El Tiempo* reader Eduardo Pizarro, October 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010:

I have to confess that I did not hold Ingrid in high regard... She seemed arrogant... I closed the cycle of rejection towards her after I read her book. It reminded me about the testimonios of survival from Nazi concentration camps. Her book is one that can be read with passion, just like a novel. It should be read by all Colombians.

The above opinions in the editorial section of *El Tiempo* show that potential readers in Colombia do feel strongly about their opposition to kidnappings and the torture that captives are subjected. Despite clear opposition to social injustice and human rights abuses, the Colombian potential readers have to grapple with the negative attitudes surrounding ex-politicians.

Although the above opinions of potential readers find Betancourt's kidnapping story worthy of reading independently of the preconceptions circulated in the media about Betancourt, the opinions expressed by focus group participants and NGO representatives during the interviews conducted in July 2011 reveal that different types of victims (and their stories) have different

effects on the readers. For example, a participant during a focus group expresses his ambivalence towards the social effectiveness of testimonios written by ex-politicians:

I think that it depends on who writes the testimonio because it could be a political trick, which is the most common situation. In other words, John Doe is asked to write his book in support of the government, the guerrilla or the paramilitaries. That is why, I think it is a political trick as well as a commercial and consumerist endeavor. (Focus Group-#1, Participant #06, July 6th, 2011)

Another focus group participant expresses why Betancourt's testimonio fails to encourage her to act upon her ethical beliefs against violence:

Regarding those books [testimonios written by ex-politicians], I have not been a bit interested in buying or reading them. I feel like Ingrid Betancourt is trying to say "hey look at me, I had a great life before my tragedy, and not I can't have it back". It seems like she thinks we [Colombians] are in debt to her. So many other people suffer in silence in this country. No body listens to them. For example, there is a radio show called the "voices from captivity" which airs like at four in the morning. They [family members of kidnapped people] call in and give messages, read letters to their loved ones. I think listening to their stories is enough to understand and feel for the suffering of those families. The content is probably the same as what you can find in a Best Seller [such as Betancourt's book]. (Focus Group-#1, Participant #01, July 6th, 2011)

During a different focus group session I asked whether participants would read or have read testimonios like that of Betancourt, Perez and Rojas and received an overwhelming negative response by half of the participants who agreed that the reason for not reading those books was primarily because the authors were politicians. Participant #3 summarized the focus group participants' consensus as follows:

[I haven't read them] because they are important personalities recognized by society and there are more people who are still kidnapped but to society they are insignificant people because they have no economic means. Society does not care about them. (Focus Group-#2, July 12th, 2011).

When asked what would be a better way to increase social awareness of the armed conflict and the social injustices in the country besides published testimonios by ex-politicians, focus group participants agreed that the best way to understand others' suffering is through personal relationships and communication and avoiding the mass media and commercial books. For example focus group participant #6 says:

You have to be open to listening and seek the small hidden stories, which can tell us a lot about what is going on in the country. For example, the NGOs are a good place to learn about the situation because their information is based on real life experiences and they provide public panels where you can hear from people who are the true victims of the conflict. (Focus Group-#1, July 6th, 2012).

This sentiment is also expressed by an NGO when I asked if in their view the testimonios of ex-politicians contribute to the NGO's memory reconstruction and visibility efforts:

I think any human rights violation is a crime against humanity and I think that those kidnappings are an example of very serious crimes. However, it is interesting to see that the government has thought and planned strategies to rescue or negotiate their liberation from captivity because those people have the support from the media, the international community, and are visible. That is why the government feels obligated to look for solutions. That is not fair with the other people that are kidnapped and are victims of human rights violations by the government but do not have the same visibility. (Interviewee #2, July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

Another individual talks about the media coverage and the testimonios of ex-politicians:

Our work is direct to the victims that are marginalized and are victims of the state. Those books tell the story of victims of the guerrilla. All the hype that the media has created around those testimonios is because the media wants to show the barbarous behavior of the guerrilla. However, at a personal level I think it is important to be informed about the crimes that the guerrilla commits and it is very sad that she [Ingrid Betancourt] experienced six years of captivity under precarious conditions; anybody should realize that it is inhumane. (Interviewee #4, July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

From the point of view of some focus group participants there are different types of victims of the country's war and their stories have different significance:

I feel like we could holistically understand the conflict if we listen to the stories of people who experience it on a daily basis, in places where the armed conflict is always present, not just the stories of people who have been kidnapped even though it is very sad that they were captive. We should listen to the stories of the people inside the conflict. (Participant #2, Focus Group-#2, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

The following quote by a focus group participant also talks about the difference between testimonios of ex-politicians vs. marginalized population:

Reading a book about a person that you have never met could only mean that you read it because of wanting to know about the gossip. But you do not realize that there are other people who are still kidnapped but because they do not have the money to get help, they are forgotten and the rest of the world does not seem to care about them. (Participant #3, Focus Group-#2, July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

Interviews with potential readers confirm that testimonios are regarded as important tools to learn about the social injustices in the country. However, potential readers draw clear distinctions between testimonios of ex-politicians (typically victimized by the guerrilla groups) and people who are not represented by the media and have been victimized by the government's armed groups, the Army and the Police, and the paramilitaries. Testimonios by people in the margins of society were considered by interviewees as more representative of the real causes and effects of



the violence caused by the war in the country.

## **CONCLUSION**

As social products, the effectiveness of testimonios in encouraging readers to act upon their ethical beliefs depends on not only the dynamics of their production (the role of the narrator, writer/editor) and textual elements, but also rests on the preconceived notions of the potential readers regarding the intention of the authors of the testimonios.

In general people who participated in the interviews and focus groups regarded testimonios as significant because they visualize the horrors of the armed conflict in the country. In a social context where human rights violations are an everyday occurrence, the sharing of a testimonio is considered as serving the purpose of individual and social healing. However, potential readers differentiate between testimonios authored by people from the elite, such as ex-politicians, and those perceived as marginalized and not represented in the mass media.

Interviews reveal a hierarchy of victims in two ways. First, those interviewed differentiated between people who are victimized by the state and those victimized by the guerrillas. Second, interviewees differentiated victims who have historically been disenfranchised and poor and those who become victims through specific one-time events such as kidnappings. Those interviewed considered the suffering of the historically disenfranchised as more authentic and representative to the effects of the armed conflict. Thus, reading or listening to their stories was considered a more effective way to become better informed about the realities of the conflict than reading testimonios of kidnappings authored by ex-politicians. Moreover, the differentiation between politicians and other types of victims' testimonios, reveals that a "silencing" process regarding the voices of politicians is taking place in the Colombian public sphere. In the eyes of the general public there is a differentiation of victims within the context of national conflict.

Furthermore, this paper shows that although testimonios of kidnappings victims in Colombia tell painful stories of violence and social injustice, the authors' perceived political agenda and intention is a crucial factor that inhibits the testimonio's potential to encourage people to read the stories. This points to the uncertainty that kidnapping testimonios written by ex-politicians could promote social action among Colombian readers. Future research, could consider general public mistrust of the government as an additional aspect that may inhibit the potential of ex-politicians' testimonios to encourage people to read such narratives and engage in social change. A future study could compare the social effectiveness of the testimonios of victims of state violence, what is known as disappearances, to kidnapping committed by the guerrilla, which both are crimes against humanity.

This research also points to the need for further ethnographic research regarding the flow of testimonios from organizations to diverse audiences such as national and international governmental and non-governmental organizations, and the general public, etc. Specifically, future research could look at the circulation of testimonios of ex-politicians and how it compares to the circulation of the more traditional testimonio literature, and the consequences of different circulation patterns on the social effectiveness of testimonios.

Parallel to this, future research on testimonios in Colombia should consider the effect of the mainstream media on the witnessing function of testimonios. If the main goal of a testimonio is to give visualization to unknown stories of human rights violations and to convince people to take action in order to prevent more violations, then it would be important to understand what

effect mass media has on the potential social project of testimonios that are extensively covered by the national media. Would these stories lose their “witnessing” value due to the media coverage?

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