The Testimonio Effect in *Slash and Burn:* Representing the Voices of Women in War

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract……………………………………………………………………………………...4

Introduction………………………………………………………………………………4

Overview of Primary Source – *Slash and Burn*…………………………………...……………6

Civil War (1980-1992)……………………………………………….…………………....8

Literature Review………………………………………………..…………….………12

Theory and Methodology……………………………..…………..…………………13

Analysis

Part I: Inscribing Testimonio in Fictional Narratives……………………………………………16

Part II: (Il)legitimacy, Truth, Memory………………………………………….….……....25

Part III: Gendered Experiences of War……………………………………….……….....27

Part IV: Negotiating the Past in the Present………………………………………..……....30

Part V: Bearing Witness……………………………………………………………………….32

Conclusion…………………………………………………………………………………35

Works Cited………………………………………………………………………………..37

The Testimonio Effect in *Slash and Burn:* Representing the Voices of Women in War

Abstract:

Slash and Burn (2021) by Claudia Hernández is a timeless, nameless, placeless account of an ex-combatant mother grappling with the legacy of civil war in her country. I argue that this novel generates a testimonial effect through powerful accounts, rooted in oral discourse, underscoring gender as a defining element in the lived experiences of women and girls during El Salvador's civil war. In emulating testimonio, *Slash and Burn* becomes an alternative literary text that defies the colonial logic of linearity and highlights women's implication within deeper political and social processes by re-inscribing their voices into the historical narrative. Ultimately, this novel's reception is about bearing witness to the civil war and its impacts through the imaginative reconstruction of memories as characters negotiate coming to terms with a tumultuous past alive in the present.

Key Words: testimonio, testimonial fiction, civil war, personal and political, El Salvador

Introduction

Central American countries have suffered historical similarities involving severe repression under military dictatorships "infamous for their use of torture, assassination, and disappearances of activists" (Ress 8-9). During this time, testimonio "was a critical narrative genre and solidarity tool" and the long years of violence and oppression yielded multiple powerful accounts such as *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* and Barrios de Chungara's *Si Me Permiten Hablar* (Silber 9). El Salvador's civil war has been cited as "one of the most devastating conflicts in modern Latin American history" and emerged from a long history of extreme social inequality tied to land distribution (Chávez 1784). The poor racialized majority was represented by the insurgent Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN), composed of *campesinos*[1]

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[1] *Campesino* in Spanish-speaking regions refers to a peasant farmer.

defending themselves against the powerful, hyper militarized state. Their efforts to revolutionize El Salvador are documented in María Teresa Tula's story *Hear My Testimony*, wherein she elaborates on her awakening of (political) consciousness during the war and participation and subsequent leadership in CO-MADRES, a committee of mothers and relatives of prisoners dedicated to identifying and retrieving bodies of the 'disappeared,' in other words, politically assassinated.[2]

Testimonio emerged as a subversive genre and, therefore, holds the capacity to redefine historical events from below by re-inscribing unheard or, rather, previously silenced voices into cultural memory. Honoring women's stories from pivotal and often traumatic moments in a nation's history demonstrates the intersection of the personal and the political or, "how personal experience contains larger political meaning" (Latina Feminist Group 3). For this reason, the Latina Feminist Group situates testimonio as a "powerful method for feminist research praxis" (3). Among this group of scholars, Inés Hernández Avila asks: "how do our personal histories intersect with each other as *mujeres*, and with the collective histories of our communities?" (300) Furthermore, how are the "cumulative effects" of "individual and social histories" processed by past and future generations (ibid)? This is precisely what Claudia Hernández tackles in *Slash and Burn,* a novel exploring the intergenerational impacts of civil war in El Salvador with a particular focus on the daily lives of women and girls grappling with legacies of conflict in the aftermath of the war.

Although testimonio is thought to be exhausted by some, its elements live on in Central American literature of the 21st century. My contention is that Claudia Hernández's novel *Slash*

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[2] Suspected activists would be pulled out of their homes in the middle of the night by paramilitary death squads to be questioned and tortured, usually ending in murder (Viterna 15). The civil war resulted in over 70,000 civilian killings and disappearances, although the total mortality rate due to the violence remains unknown (Green and Ball 782).

and Burn actively engages with testimonio elements, portraying a compelling literary account of the experience of women living through and beyond El Salvador's civil war. The novel evokes orality in its anecdotal style which weaves together themes of dispossession, forced migration, duty, and post-war disillusion, speaking to an unresolved past that lives on despite reassurances that the war ended long ago. The above themes are woven into a decentralized, timeless, placeless, and nameless narrative that, as a fictional text, goes beyond testimonio, reproducing polyvocality and offering alternative knowledge dissemination that transcends the Western logic of linearity.

Slash and Burn

Claudia Hernández, born in San Salvador in 1975, pursued two degrees, the first in Journalism followed by Communications and Public Relations. As part of a generation of authors raised during the war, she went on to write short stories predominantly centering on life during and after the civil war and was awarded the Anna Seghers Prize for her work in 2004. Her first novel *Slash and Burn* (2018), translated to English by Julia Sánchez (2021), traces the impacts of El Salvador's civil war through an inter-generational narrative focused on a mother and her daughters dealing with rural life in the aftermath of political turmoil and trauma. The plot is narrated omnisciently in the third person bordering on the first and focuses primarily on women's stories, each branching out from one another, elaborating the particulars of their quotidian lives through feminine eyes and voices. Without revealing proper nouns, Hernández's prose flows seamlessly between characters, locations, and moments in time, echoing oral discourse and storytelling from memory. Although confusing at times, this creates a dynamic constellation of people and places, mapped out by their relationships to one another. In non-chronological fashion, the narrative weaves together multiple lives and periods of time.

The story begins with a young girl who joins the guerrilla movement and becomes a mother as a teenage combatant. Like many of the combatants in real life, this woman comes from a rural village and received no more than a year of formal schooling as a child. The narrative's colloquial vocabulary and stream of consciousness style reflect her level of education. Years later, in the novel's present storyline, she sets out to locate her lost daughter, the firstborn who was taken from her during the war and sold to a foreign couple to "fund the cause". The lost daughter, adopted by a couple in France, does not wish to form a relationship with her biological mother. The story progresses according to recollection rather than chronology as characters visit the past, as well as potential futures, through generational vignettes informed by their thoughts and memories. The ex-combatant mother works tirelessly to protect her daughters living in a post-war community sown with distrust, fear, and hypocrisy. In the interest of clarity, I will use "the mother" to identify the novel's 'protagonist,' although, I make the argument that there is no central protagonist in this story. She is a mother to five daughters: the "firstborn" or "lost daughter" who was conceived with her first *compañero* on the frontlines and raised by adoptive parents in France, the "second eldest" or "eldest raised under her roof", "the daughter who goes to university," "the second youngest" and "the littlest" daughter.

The title *Slash and Burn* refers to El Salvador's agricultural roots, specifically an agricultural method. The *zafra*[3] generally refers to the late summer or early autumn sugar cane harvest in countries that were colonized by Spain. It begins with clearing and tilling the land to soften the earth for plowing and planting, followed by burning and harvesting the crops. This title carries major implications regarding El Salvador's civil war because, not only does it metaphorically convey the immense destruction caused by the war, but equally highlights the

[3] *Zafra,* in English, means growing season or harvest.

agricultural roots of the conflict dating back centuries. Rural communities "in the regions where sugarcane is grown are the poorest, most marginalized populations – malnourished, and contaminated" (Voices of El Salvador 2). These are the rural areas that became war zones from 1980-1992. *Slash and Burn,* by emphasizing that land and class divisions have always been at the heart of the issue, pays homage to the collective experience of rural communities that took up the revolution and were most heavily impacted by the war.

Civil War (1980-1992)

El Salvador is a small country located on the Pacific coast of Central America and the most densely populated country in the mainland Americas with a "long history of extreme class inequalities" (Viterna 22). In the early 16th century, Spanish colonizers appropriated Indigenous lands to extract raw materials. Early colonists established sugarcane plantations exploiting enslaved Africans and Indigenous people for labour (Voices of El Salvador 2). In the following centuries, El Salvador experienced an indigo boom followed by the coffee boom of the 19th century which "encouraged local elites to increase their landholdings and their control of labor by any means possible" (Viterna 22). Consequently, communal landholdings were abolished by a series of laws in the late 1880s, moving "approximately a quarter of arable land in El Salvador from public to private hands" (ibid). Moreover, an agrarian law dictated that any landless laborers would be arrested for vagrancy and subsequently forced to work on plantations, reflecting the legalization of a "system of forced labor that had been unofficially practiced for at least the prior century" (ibid). This large shift from public to private property operated in conjunction with the establishment of a new police force to protect the interests of the wealthy.

The two most significant political and economic trends of the early 20th century consisted of "increasing concentration of land in the hands of fewer and fewer people, and the increasing

size of security forces to suppress uprising and force work on those lands" (Viterna 23). However, El Salvador's "exclusive dependence" on exporting agricultural commodities restricted its economic diversification "and its ability to absorb the population displaced by the commercialization of agriculture" (Mason 2). The subsequent expansion of export agriculture heightened the existing social inequalities between landowners and the poorer demographic. In 1932, the price of coffee plummeted due to the worldwide economic recession, and when the *campesinos*' only source of livelihood disappeared they formed a Marxist-inspired rebellion (Viterna 22). In protest against the landed oligarchy, Salvadoran peasant groups invaded coffee farms and killed the landowners, but their rebellion was brutally suppressed "by the army, the National Guard, and the landowners' private security forces" and the rebels were executed (23). La *matanza*[4] established political dominance for the agrarian elite, enforced by the Salvadoran military (Mason 4). The military protected class interests by repressing labor activism and "in return… was allowed to exercise control over the machinery of the state" (Mason 4). The inherent reliance of landed oligarchy on military powers reflects a political and economic partnership that led to the continuous strengthening of the army to violently suppress all supposed enemies of the state, meaning El Salvador was "essentially under military rule" from 1932 until the 1960s (Viterna 22).

In the 1960s, during a period of US-backed liberalization motivated by Cold War tensions and, more specifically, the Western fear of the 'domino effect' spreading communism in the Global South, land concentration intensified while military control was "temporarily abated" (Viterna 23). The heightened liberalization efforts aided by the U.S. government decreased repression and enabled increased political activity in the form of unionization efforts and working-class

[4] *La matanza* means "The Massacre" in Spanish and refers to the peasant uprising that began in January of 1932 in western El Salvador.

organizing. This brief political opening came to an abrupt close when military leaders overturned the election of Jose Napoleon Duarte, civilian member of the Christian Democratic party and champion of moderate reform. The national system of exploitation reached a "critical stage, due to their inability to cope with the most basic needs such as health, food, education, housing, clothing, employment, as well as their democratic rights" (O'Sullivan 5). As poverty rose, communities experienced a complete absence of education and health care (Viterna 15). Rural inhabitants of the country had to work long hours to grow food for the wealthy *patrón* while *campesino* children went hungry. Advocates of democracy and revolution stood up against the injustice of those trying to preserve the oligarchic military regime that had been in power since 1932 (Chávez 1784) but marches for rights in the capital "were often violently dispelled by the Armed Forces" (Viterna 15). Tula speaks to the extreme lengths taken by the military state to suppress workers' rights: "whenever workers asked for a wage increase, they were killed, disappeared, machine-gunned, and assaulted in their factories, schools, and institutes" (84). Nevertheless, the class consciousness gained by political groups that formed during this period did not lose momentum.

The 1970s became a period of identification with liberation theology, creating the emergence of left-wing political parties and grassroots movements contesting the political and economic hegemony of the military and oligarchy (Hume 72). The Salvadoran opposition's rhetoric was underpinned by two intellectual pillars: liberation theology and leftist-derived solidarity (O'Sullivan 2). Liberationism was "instrumental in shaping the attitudes of faith-based agencies" that condemned the country's unfair social structures (ibid). In the late 1970s, community groups began including combat and self-defense training in addition to their political discussions. The *milicia*, soon to be the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional

(FMLN), started sleeping in the wilderness because paramilitary death squads would pull "suspected activists out of their homes in the middle of the night" (Viterna 15). Conditions in the wilderness were harsh due to lack of food, water, sleep, and clothing, coupled with the exhaustion of being constantly on the move. In 1979, the Salvadoran Armed Forces launched a military coup against the state which became the beginning of over a decade-long civil war for the country. This coup "installed a reform-oriented *junta*[5] composed of centrist leaders, many affiliated with the Christian Democratic Party" with the goals of bringing military forces under civilian control and restarting the liberalization process (24). Reform and repression were both "intended to deter popular support for the FMLN," which explains why land reform was a primary goal advanced by the junta (Mason 5). However, "the new government never carried out the agrarian reform in spite of all their promises" (Tula 82) and by the end of that year, El Salvador was embroiled in full-scale civil war.

Formed officially in 1980, the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) was a clandestine leftist group working to overthrow El Salvador's hyper-militaristic government. As an umbrella organization, the FMLN drew together five separate armed groups under its stated goal to "overthrow the corrupt Salvadoran state and institute a socialist society in its place" (Viterna 24). Although the FMLN developed solidarity networks around the world, it "never came close to the size or strength of its enemy," the Salvadoran Armed Forces, which outnumbered the insurgency by the thousands (27). In 1992, the United Nations (UN) brokered a peace accord that ended the war between the FMLN insurgents and the Salvadoran government (Silber 2). At the close of the civil war, the Salvadoran guerilla army underwent a formal demobilization process, in which thirty percent of the officially demobilized combatants were

[5] *Junta* refers to a military or political group that rules a country after taking power by force.

female (Viterna 4). This directly relates to the importance of writing a novel from the female perspective of the war.

Literature Review

Testimonio emerged as a resistance text representing the voices of many whose lives have been affected by particular social events. Testimonio typically takes place in an interview format that is recorded for subsequent transcription and translation but can also be written from the outset in diaries, letters, or journals. Although a specific moment of inception is difficult to pinpoint for testimonio, it has been "inscribed and sanctioned as a literary mode since the 1970s" thanks to liberation efforts and geopolitical resistance movements to imperialism in Latin America (Reyes and Rodriguez 526). Literary testimonio is generally narrated in the first person, describing "socially and collectively significant experiences" (Zimmerman 12). A unique characteristic of testimonio is its political and conscientized reflection (Reyes and Rodriguez 526). Often, these texts engage with ethical, political, historical legacies of world events such as totalitarian governments, war violence, displacement, or other types of human rights abuses (528).

Some critics at the heart of testimonio studies, such as John Beverley, have developed definitions of the genre. Beverley offers a narrow definition of testimonio:

> a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or significant life experience. (Margin at the Center 12-13)

For others, this complex genre "continues to defy definition" (Mueller 46). As a narrative practice, testimonio is described as an experiential, self-conscious "urgent voicing" of something witnessed (Reyes and Rodriguez 525). Its structure ranges from memoirs, oral histories, qualitative vignettes,

prose, song lyrics, spoken word, or any combination of these categories (ibid) but typically contains a "mixture of biography, oral history, allegory, and the chorus of collective voices" (Mueller 46). This is often an intentional and political transmission of knowledge through a narrative that simultaneously creates "new lines of engagement" for questioning the nation's historical recency (Whitlock 10). Testimonio is widely viewed as a counter-method for marginalized people to re-inscribe previously unheard historical narratives from below and has, therefore, been linked with grassroots political activism.

Scholars have equally focused on the form of the narrative "told in the first person by a narrator who is the real protagonist or witness of events" to define testimonio (Reyes and Rodriguez 527). Politicized and self-conscious elements are paramount in this definition as it concentrates on events told by a narrator seeking empowerment through voicing his or her experience (ibid). Moreover, advocating for writing as a means of liberation highlights the genre's concurrent emergence and ascent with liberationist pedagogy, allowing the narrator to share "an experience that is not only liberating in the process of telling but also political in its production of awareness to listeners and readers alike" (Reyes and Rodriguez 527). Arturo Arias, an eminent scholar of Central American literature, conceptualizes literature as a tool for elaborating cross-cultural understanding as well as "solidarity across linguistic, national, ethnic, and cultural borders, not to mention even differences of social class" (xi). Fictional or not, narratives are a powerful tool for change and revolution.

Theoretical Framework

Testimonio emerged in Central America as a textual account of trauma involving a first-person witness. Rooted in conflict and orality, this genre became a powerful, subjective, first-person account of trauma that simultaneously signals an expression of suffering at the community

level. As a subversive form of literature, testimonio holds the capacity to redefine historical narratives from below. For many theorists, women's testimonio is considered a feminist strategy and methodology for representing the Other. The Latina Feminist Group identifies testimonio as an artistic form and methodology that helps create politicized understandings of identity and community (3). Kathryn Smith highlights the significance of women engaging in a masculine genre seeing as "the word testimonio itself excludes women completely" and there is no female form of the Spanish noun (28). Moreover, there exists no female version of the word "to witness" in Spanish, yet women have "taken over a literary genre all about witnessing" (ibid). Acting as a relational framework with an emphasis on Indigenous feminisms, testimonio challenges conventional ways of doing politics and represents "new for(u)ms of political protest" (Smith 25). The women telling their stories emphasize issues of "survival, respect of human rights and gender equality" in their writing, themes which I specifically address in my analysis of *Slash and Burn* (Dandavati qtd. in Smith 9). As a literary genre, testimonio has gone so far as to modify "the way that Latin American women confront politics" (Smith 25). Kathryn Smith views women's testimonial literature as a "formidable challenge to the authoritarian powers threatening peace in many Latin American countries" and identifies two axes of patriarchy against whom they fight: military or governmental control and male revolutionary chauvinism (21-22). This is highly relevant to the analysis of gendered inequality in *Slash and Burn*, as the story fluctuates between moments before, during, and after the civil war all underscored by misogyny at both micro and systemic levels.

Methodology

To shed light on the elements of testimonio present in *Slash and Burn*, I conduct a literary analysis of the plot, characters, focalization, and voices in the novel. In identifying the story's

themes and aesthetics, particular emphasis is placed on the reproduction of polyvocality and collective storytelling. As one of the main objectives of this research is to demonstrate how the novel engages with the genre of testimonio, I draw primarily on Rigoberta Menchú's foundational text *I, Rigoberta Menchú,* as well as María Teresa Tula's *Hear My Testimony*. Menchú's text speaks to testimonio's structural and aesthetic elements while Tula's confirms the details and tone in Hernández's portrayal of events during El Salvador's civil war. Furthermore, Dana Amir's theorization of bearing witness to the modes of traumatic testimony strengthens my argument for a metonymic reading of *Slash and Burn.*

I ground my work in Julia Zulver's theorization of high-risk feminism in El Salvador, in tandem with Tula's testimonio, as a framework to understand the intersection between feminism and testimonio in *Slash and Burn*. Zulver defines feminism as "a generalised collective identity that places value on challenging gender hierarchy and changing women's social status" (176). In particular, she conducted research with women in El Salvador to understand women's mobilization in contexts of heightened and gendered violence. Her framework for high-risk feminism is built on four tenets, one of which highly relates to testimonio as a literary mode: collective identity creation (ibid). Tula observes that the label "feminist" is not widely adopted in El Salvador, she explains that "our struggle as women comes together with our struggle for change in El Salvador. Our feminism doesn't just involve fighting for ourselves, but for a change for all of us." (125). This emphasizes the identification with a collective whole, as well as the differentiation from and rejection of mainstream feminism as a white Eurocentric movement.

As for information on women's experiences of civil war, I primarily consult Jocelyn Viterna's *Women in War* (2014). Viterna spent years gathering qualitative data in rural El Salvador, conducting 230 formal interviews with 60 female participants, all of whom were women

participants in the insurgency during that time. She compiled this extensive research in her book which answers why women became guerillas and what they experienced in the insurgent armies. I utilize this research especially for its grassroots essence because Viterna conveys the conditions of the civil war through women's life stories. She asks: "What are the consequences of those experiences for the women themselves and for the gendered societies in which they live?" (4). Viterna weaves together stories and information about "village-level histories, official and unofficial FMLN policies and procedures, power dynamics between competing political groups, and women's status in postwar El Salvador" (8). This is highly relevant to my analysis as her interview process incorporates testimonio as its "methodological cousin" (Reyes and Rodriguez 532). Finally, as the novel engages with national and continental history, I frame the reading in the cultural and historical context of El Salvador, and more broadly Central America and Latin America in the context of the Cold War.

Analysis

Part I: Inscribing Testimonio in Fictional Narratives

In the 1970s, authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Audre Lorde "legitimized subject matter and modes of writing previously ignored or deemed unacceptable" through narrating their daily experiences as people of colour (Latina Feminist Group 4). These women revolutionized print tradition in the United States by conveying mostly undocumented experiences while utilizing oral traditions (ibid). Though these are examples of American women, parallels can be drawn to Central American literature by focusing on the importance of personal narratives. Latin American testimonio "emerged in the wake of social movements, liberation theology, and other consciousness-raising, grass-roots movements" in the 1960s and 70s, around the same time

that Morrison, Walker, and Lorde were making progress for Black women in the U.S. (Brabeck 253).

Unlike autobiography, testimonio is not a single autonomous account but a "collectively experienced reality" told by a first-person witness to the event (Brabeck 253). Reyes and Rodriguez assert that testimonios are accounts of social and political events that permeate "the greater human consciousness" (528). Testimonio's approach differs immensely from the foundational premise of Western history which credits highly esteemed *individuals* for their accomplishments or 'discoveries'. Rooted in Western Enlightenment values, autobiographical authorship is an archetype of selfhood in which the subject is typically rational, sovereign, western, white, and male (Brabeck 253). This model prioritizes romantic notions of selfhood as authentic, autonomous, self-realizing, and transcendent. (Whitlock 3). In contrast, via testimonio, the speaker gains credibility "not through being an exceptional member of a community but through being a part indistinguishable from the whole" (Brabeck 253). Beverley refers to the testimonial narrator as an "organic intellectual" of the subaltern "who speaks to the hegemony by means of a metonymy of self in the name and in the place of it" (11). As Rigoberta Menchú emphasizes in the opening lines of her testimonio, "it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people… My personal experience is the reality of a whole people" (3). Menchú's testimonio detailing Guatemala's 34-year civil war is a prime departure point for understanding the collectivity at the heart of testimonio, rooted in Maya tradition. The basis of the Mayan philosophy of life is "profoundly communal" as human beings are "more likely to experience solidarity and survival through relationships" (Brabeck 254). Brabeck makes the compelling argument that Menchú's collective identity is "inherited from her past and renegotiated in her present" (255). This philosophy

constructs the self as embedded in social relations. Likewise, *Slash and Burn* operates through a relational framework that emulates testimonio's collective essence.

Testimonios are, by definition, the lived experience of an individual member of a community; the speaker acts as a "voice for many" without conceiving of themselves as an extraordinary individual (Brabeck 255). Although these accounts reflect the experiences of families and communities, the victim adopts the role of the sole narrating voice. Literary testimonios lack a definitive author – typically, the first-person witness orates their story with an interlocutor who transcribes the script for subsequent translation and publication. Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, the Venezuelan anthropologist and interlocutor for Menchú's testimonio, explains that initially, she "gave her a schematic outline, a chronology" but as Menchú told her story she made "more and more digressions" (29). Burgos-Debray elaborates that this caused her to adopt a monologue format when transforming the recordings into written text. Hernández effectively reproduces this digressive form in a way that creates a patchwork of voices. *Slash and Burn* goes beyond testimonio and engages with the collective experience through multiple anonymous testimonial voices. The novel, despite being mainly centred on the mother, gives equal voice to all the women and girls through seamless transitions from one character to another. The testimonio effect is also generated by the absence of dialogue throughout the narrative as speech is not cited but reported. In evoking a stream of consciousness narration, *Slash and Burn* permits the reader to access the characters' flow of thoughts and feelings as they narrate to themselves or others who happen to be present, replicating an interior testimonio as a way of making sense of things in a post-conflict world. Arias contends that novels, as a medium, have the ability to "give heteroglossic representations," meaning the presence of two or more voices in an artistic work

(xii). Rather than identifying the characters as individuals, readers are encouraged to decipher how these voices relate to one another.

In emulating testimonio, *Slash and Burn* offers an alternative dissemination of knowledge that defies the Western logic of linearity. Colonial history privileges unique or remarkable events, striving for a "definitive account of people and places" as its cultural judgment of value (Taylor 83). In contrast, Hernández adopts a peculiar style through the nearly complete omission of proper nouns leaving people, places, and organizations unnamed. Location names are replaced by their general meaning; for instance, the narrator describes "the farm named after a horse" or "the village named after a flower" that could be any number of places in this unnamed "tropical country" (Hernández 12). This deliberate opacity results in a timeless, nameless, and placeless story that connects its anonymous characters only through their connections to one another. The narrator describes people in the story using their pronouns, context, and relationships. Therefore, characters are identified in a fluid manner that is constantly shifting, defined by the information revealed at different points in the narrative and, more importantly, by who surrounds the person at any given moment. The protagonist is at one time a daughter and sister until she becomes a mother to her own daughters; to others, she has been a radio operator, an ex-compañera-in-arms, a wife, a neighbour – the possibilities are endless. Hernández displays identity as a dynamic process by repeatedly spelling out these relations as they change. The firstborn daughter is named "lost daughter," but to the daughters raised in El Salvador, she is "the sister they didn't grow up with". In this instance, names are replaced by clauses that reveal an absence describing the suffering imposed on families by the war. Ultimately, the lack of names portrays identity as built on shifting sands as it necessarily implicates a community of people in the description of any character, eliminating any prioritization of individuality.

The absence of proper nouns emphasizes the rhizomorphous web of relations connecting people and places to each other. *Slash and Burn* operates by variation and expansion, perpetually prolonging itself, breaking off and starting again each time another unnamed person or place is visited through recollection, resulting in a decentralized, non-hierarchical narrative. This aligns with the metonymic mode of testimony identified by Dana Amir as the witness being "led by the story rather than the latter being led by the witness" (22). Brabeck argues that the creation and dissemination of testimonio help create the conditions under which you can hear the voices of Others which will help develop an "egalitarian, centreless dialogue" (253). Although the story branches out from the mother in *Slash and Burn,* nobody takes priority nor receives a unique designation as an individual in this story. Post-war, the mother refuses to see a psychologist, in part, because "she hated the fact that they couldn't understand that what they referred to as her own experience didn't belong to her" (Hernández 185). This directly relates to the reproduction of a collective experience and the character's inability to disassociate herself and her experience from her community. Testimonio's narrative voice is typically a "witness or protagonist who metonymically represents other individuals or groups that have lived through other similar situations or the circumstances which induce them" (Zimmerman 12). Psychology, a discipline conceptualized in individual terms from its inception, is evidently alienating to her.

The inherent erosion of central authority without a first-person narrator creates a unique relationship between the narrator and reader of the story. The narrator of a testimonio is intended as a collective identity that challenges traditional assumptions regarding knowledge and invites the reader to empathize with the narrator while also "signalling the distance between them" (Brabeck 255). Rigoberta Menchú deliberately maintains her distance from the reader by "consciously withholding information from us on the grounds that it could be used against her and

her people" (Beverley 10). Though she describes customs, ideas, rites, structures, and relationships in her Maya community, she equally alludes to the community secrets she guards, reminding the reader of the limits of what they can know. This production of distance excludes "the western intellectual from her circle of intimates" (Brabeck 256). Literary testimonios are the most distanced accounts because they undergo "the highest degree of aesthetic, intellectual and emotional elaboration" (Amir 3). Menchú calls for solidarity while preserving her integrity and loyalty to her community.

In *Slash and Burn,* anonymity simultaneously protects the memory of the characters who populate this story and respects the information that people either have a right to keep to themselves or often have a duty not to reveal. In this sense, the characters' anonymity represents a nod to the reality of war because "back then, under those circumstances, not knowing a person's real name or where they were from was a safety measure" (Hernández 63). Keeping birth names secret was of crucial importance during the war. María Teresa Tula speaks to this in her testimonio as well, by mentioning instances of torture for information, including her own, at the hands of the police and other authorities. The members of CO-MADRES used pseudonyms to protect one another from knowing their true identities and possibly giving each other up under duress (Tula 132). Similarly, when the girl in *Slash and Burn* finds her father "in the village named after a flower" he does not ask about the family because any details would endanger his family if he were to be captured and questioned (Hernández 38). Likewise, her younger brother who gets recruited by the army never mentions her existence to the other soldiers; he was "very discrete," a necessary survival strategy then as "you never knew if the person beside you was a traitor or an informer, or what sort of information could be used against you at any time" (181). Tula explains that even within her marriage, prior to her joining CO-MADRES, her husband did not discuss El Salvador's

political situation with her because he did not know if she could be trusted (71). In fact, turning in one's spouse or family member was "something that [happened] a lot in El Salvador" (ibid). Upon joining CO-MADRES, she was taught "not to ask about things [she] didn't need to know about" as a security measure (69). The use of pseudonyms, inexact language, and accessing information on a need-to-know basis was often key to survival during the war.

In de-centering the focalization and constantly shifting the viewpoint, Hernández adopts a collective narrative without homogenizing the experiences of those represented in the novel. Much of *Slash and Burn* is dedicated to the various characters' survival strategies to portray ordinary people and the various methods they adopted to outlast the chaos and brutality of the war. Masking or feigning certain emotions are common strategies throughout the narrative. Early on, the mother - a young girl at the time - runs away from her village with her aunt. When soldiers capture them, "although all she felt was anger, she cried and cried as though she were afraid" as an act of self-preservation (Hernández 25). Her aunt had instructed her to do so, informing her that "if they didn't cry, the men might think they were defying them" (ibid). Years after the war, trapped by social obligations following her husband's death, she "had to… shed tears for him as if things between them had been going well" despite his infidelity and manipulation (90). Once again, summoning tears is an act of self-preservation only this time, it is related to women's need to keep up appearances to avoid facing social ostracization.

Hernández offers a brief window into the experience on the other side as well in her portrayal of the Armed Forces during the war. Upon receiving the order to free a civilian group, "some [soldiers] were relieved… Others felt nothing. It was a way of surviving" (Hernández 29). The mother later experiences the betrayal of discovering that her youngest brother has joined the ranks of the Armed Forces as a soldier "with the same haircut and posture. With the same uniform,

manners, and eyes trained to inspect every corner of a room before entering. With a salary and set days of leave" (Hernández 176). Her observation is two-fold: she views him as the enemy while pointing to the contrast between their compensation for service. She tells him she is ashamed of him and "couldn't believe that after all they'd done to their family, their house, and their father, he'd join their ranks" (ibid). No one in the family had contemplated that it was possible he might work for the other side, but he had not joined willfully. In fact, quite the opposite: "they'd just taken him in the same way they took chickens from their coops" (177). In addition to commenting on the state's forced recruitment of young men, this references the atrocities committed by the Armed Forces against village communities including burning houses to the ground and slaughtering livestock. The youngest brother's path represents the difficult choices on the ground in conflict; he frames it as "surviving. Just like they were. Even if that meant joining the army and following their orders" (Hernández 177). Moreover, the Army would take new recruits to jail if they failed to show up, forcing them to enlist "voluntarily" (Tula 40). Despite initially feeling betrayed by his actions, his sister had joined the guerrilla movement for survival reasons as well, seeking protection from aggressors who had vowed to come back for her.

A vital piece of this intergenerational puzzle is the mother's experience as a combatant in the civil war. She joins the guerrilla movement at just fourteen years old, having completed no more than one year of formal schooling, and spends her adolescence and young adulthood on the frontline. She constitutes a "reluctant guerrilla" because she is mobilized into the FMLN through crisis, defined as an "urgent, life-threatening event that requires immediate action on behalf of the respondent to avoid being severely traumatized, abused, or killed" (Viterna 98). This aptly describes the situation in the novel in which, as a young girl, she reluctantly joins the FMLN seeking refuge from attempted assault. The FMLN "promoted a narrative where the Armed Forces

brutalized rural civilians and the FMLN protected them" (110). The movement's success in portraying themselves as "the good guys" in the Salvadoran war zones "relied heavily on gender" (ibid). In fact, "women were encouraged to join the FMLN to protect themselves from rape," situating the FMLN as protectors, not conscriptors (112). The narrative pushed by the FMLN is also represented in *Slash and Burn* because "to her mind, it was soldiers who raped. They were always the culprits in the stories of assaults that she heard" (Hernández 33-34). *Slash and Burn* subverts the FMLN's chosen narrative because the boys who attempt to abduct her are guerrilla deserters whom she recognizes from previously visiting her father in the mountains. Hernández's narrative effectively conveys how non-male citizens faced and still face danger of abuse and assault from any side.

During such large-scale conflict, people had time only to think about surviving one day to the next, but the post-war period is also riddled with danger at every turn, especially for women. When the second eldest daughter raised under her roof goes to university, the backpack she purchases becomes the focal point for a comparison between her and her mother's lives. In the hills, the pink camouflage bag would have gotten her mother killed but is now a "safety measure" in addition to the clothing and hairstyle changes helping her daughter blend in with the population in the capital city (Hernández 92). To avoid becoming a target of assault, the daughter who attends university must memorize the route home from school and do all she can not to look or sound like she is from the village. Despite the contextual differences, the camouflage backpack signifies a marker of generational differences but a matter of survival in both cases. This symbol equally points to the continuation of gendered violence post-war.

Part II: (Il)legitimacy, truth, memory

Hernández's commitment to truth-telling is clear in her nuanced writing of the complexities of civil war and, specifically, the impacts on El Salvador's rural population. The juxtaposition of truth versus lies is a major motif throughout the story and is presented as greatly implicated in coming to terms with and re-building the post-war nation. Of special significance is the question of *which* characters hold the power to define the "truth" and who tells it. For instance, when applying for financial aid to attend university, the second eldest sister is assisted by an administrative employee who, having heard the life stories of many prospective students, feels she has "learned to tell the liars from truth-tellers" (Hernández 85). This woman embodies institutional power and, therefore, stands between less fortunate applicants and opportunity as she has the capacity to (de)legitimize anyone's story, granting or denying them access to education. This theme is echoed with regards to the land parcels allotted to ex-combatants at the end of the war.

The peace agreements of 1992 called for the guerrillas' return from the mountains including the UN-sponsored demobilization process and "an extensive land redistribution program" (Viterna 34). Ex-combatants returned their weapons to receive "a small parcel of land, a loan, agricultural training" and some supplies or sometimes seeds in return (ibid). Despite having fought for the resistance, the mother is denied her own share of land because of her marital status. Since parcels were distributed per family and not per person, "she'd have to make do with what her husband got" and "shouldn't be ambitious" (Hernández 87). Nothing was allotted to her family for her father or brother either who had died in combat, nor to her mother who experienced the loss of their family home during the army invasion that set fire to their village. When she enquires about this, she is met with cynicism: how are they to ensure "people weren't lying, weren't trying to take advantage of the situation?" (88). What they have labelled the "situation" involves

approximately 80,000 deaths and thousands of people left wounded or in poverty, having to deal with the national-level trauma of a 12-year long civil war. This very questioning and skepticism prevents the mother from applying for her pension post-war. She does not consider her war wounds until much later because she believes that many people suffered more gravely than her. However, she has suffered a physical impairment in the form of hearing loss because of a nearby bomb explosion that killed her father at war (294). When she decides at long length to apply for her ex-combatants pension, she is questioned by a committee that does not believe her because she cannot remember the precise day and location of the incident.

Through a literary lens informed by testimonio, the truth-telling theme ties in with the debate surrounding testimonio's legitimacy in the 1990s. Testimonio was scrutinized for reasons regarding authenticity, truth, who represents whom, and for what purposes (Elizabeth Dore qtd. In Mueller 46). Menchú's account was publicly challenged on grounds of authenticity by American anthropologist David Stoll, whose criticisms manipulate the reader into a binary "either/or situation" further othering Menchú as a marginalized voice (Arias 486). Beverley compellingly argues that the controversy launched by Stoll is "not so much about what really happened as it is about who has the authority to narrate" (82). Testimonio contains elements of experiences "shared by the collective group to whom one belongs" (Reyes and Rodriguez 528). In fact, Reyes and Rodriguez contend that "the truth of the survivor story may not be empirically, scientifically, or legally true" (527). Often, testimonio "intentionally blurs the lines between fact and fiction" (Smith 22). Past testimonios have even included some fictionalized accounts of stories built from the memories of other people. Alicia Partnoy's *The Little School,* for example, is a detailed yet fictionalized account of her time as a political prisoner during Argentina's rule by oppressive regime (ibid). Therefore, it is not a matter of truth but of telling from an individual point of view

"whose conscience has led to an analysis of the experience as a shared component of oppression" (Reyes and Rodriguez 528). Through a reconstruction of fictional people's memories, *Slash and Burn*'s narrative effectively mimics a function of testimonio involving correcting the Western canon and its "versions of the truth" (Smith 30). Re-inscribing the experiences of marginalized groups into historical narratives plays a large role in addressing systemic institutionalized practices of oppression.

Part III: Gendered Experiences of War

Before the civil war, rural villages were largely organized according to gender. Children grew up in large families where everyone worked long hours, often dividing their time between farming their small plots of land and working for wages on larger land. Women offered their services doing domestic chores including selling baked goods or washing clothes for wealthier people to make money in case of unsuccessful harvests. Men, on the other hand, traveled for wage labor "following the harvest – coffee, then cotton, then field clearing, and so on" (Viterna 27). However, increasing violence in the Salvadoran countryside "profoundly transformed traditional family structures" because "men were routinely either killed for being a suspected subversive or conscripted into the state's Armed Forces" (29). At the outset of the war, men began sleeping in the wilderness in small groups to stay safe, leaving villages in war zones primarily occupied by mothers as the few remaining adults.

Viterna speaks to the FMLN's recruitment methods based on information collected in an extensive interview process with female participants in the war. Initially, the FMLN's official policy "called for the recruitment of ideologically aligned individuals, but early activists report being recruited for their personal qualities of being both *trustworthy* and *skilled*, not their ideological maturity" (Viterna 66). The FMLN was forced to change their official recruitment

practice in response to the unmatched size of the Armed Forces; these modifications "opened the door to greater women's participation" in the FMLN (ibid).[6] Being a *gente de confianza*[7] became the defining factor rather than ideological alignment. For men, this generally meant they had participated in clandestine political pre-war while "trustworthy women were sometimes active themselves, but more often were the daughters, *compañeras*,[8] or mothers of activist men" (Viterna 66). Viterna explains that "women who became guerrillas overwhelmingly had family members in the FMLN before they joined" (114). This is the case of *Slash and Burn*'s protagonist, whose father was both involved in the insurgency prior to the war and trained his children in advance on how to use weapons and protect themselves when rumours of war began circulating. At thirteen years old, the mother's father teaches her how to assemble and fire weapons. She recalls, "it wasn't easy to join back then… someone had to see you, size you up, assign you a function" as the FMLN sought to match one's skill set to a particular job (Hernández 186).

The narrative's dynamic focalization provides insight into other female guerrilla fighters and their reasons for joining the FMLN. Details are provided regarding another woman who, in contrast with the mother, willfully joined the guerrilla movement and left for the mountains before finishing her high school education because "their country's circumstances called for immediate action" (Hernández 172). This woman is an example of a politicized guerilla because she was a self-identified activist before being recruited. Politicized guerillas underwent a gradual mobilization process from peaceful activism towards full incorporation (Viterna 89). These

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[6] The word "recruit" is not widely used by Salvadorans who participated in the war with the FMLN because *reclutar* describes the Armed Forces' forceful conscription of young men into military service. In interviews, many emphasize "it was always one's choice!" to join the FMLN (Viterna 110). Although, some were practically obligated to become guerrillas, as is the case in *Slash and Burn*.

[7] A trustworthy person.

[8] The English translation is "partner," however, in Spanish, this word can take on different meanings ranging from a comrade in arms to spouse or partner.

recruits "never talked of guerrilla camps as their only option" and joined "precisely because they did not want to stop their activism" (90). Her brief storyline also weaves in another kind of participation that did not involve fighting, when she discovers that her school's headmistress "was close to members of the church known to support the changes, allowed the [revolutionary] groups to organize within their walls, and covered for them however she could" (Hernández 172). She represents a collaborator, "any woman who had at least one regular, formalized responsibility to the FMLN, but who did not live in the FMLN guerrilla camps" (Viterna 107). The FMLN "targeted *all* male activists for guerilla recruitment" and "only young and childless female activists," but women still constituted 30 percent of the officially demobilized combatants by the end of the war (Viterna 87). Despite the high number of female participants in the insurgency, machismo equally existed in guerrilla camps. In *Slash and Burn,* the mother recalls having to "do his laundry after returning exhausted from an operation" and being punished for bathing before a male commanding officer (Hernández 89). During the revolution, women faced double marginality in the insurgency and were expected to carry out most domestic chores on top of fighting alongside the men. Although women constituted a significant portion of the revolution, they were never fully respected as equals to their male counterparts.

The culture of machismo "permeates almost all Salvadoran institutions, including the government, the police, the judicial system, and civil society, as well as the fabric of social life more generally" (Zulver 175). A "good woman" was characterized as decent, hard-working, and obedient; decency referred to a woman's sexuality which was "seen as the possession of her compañero" (Viterna 27). The patriarchal nature of marriage structures women as objects and men's property, idealizing a pious, obedient, hard-working version of womanhood equated with having many children. Birth control was forbidden, and domestic violence was common.

Moreover, a gendered double standard allowed for men to have more than one *compañera*, while women faced social ostracization if they were to leave their *compañero* "regardless of the reason" trapping them into caring for many children with too few resources (Viterna 28). The eldest daughter raised under the mother's roof marries a man who perpetuates this inequality in the home. When she attempts to get a college education, her options in selecting a program are limited because she must "study without neglecting her home," a condition she considers unfair, set by her husband (Hernández 115). The widowed mother in *Slash and Burn* is also a prime example of this as she cares for her five daughters alone. Her mother-in-law refuses to help in any capacity and goes so far as to blame her for the husband's death, accusing her of leading her son down the wrong path. Instead, the daughters' paternal grandmother provides monetary support to the "woman she approved of," his previous wife (Hernández 231). Tula explains "where I lived, people always monitored what women did, and talked about them" (28). Despite women's significant participation in the war, they continued to face extreme social scrutiny on a daily basis.

Part IV: Negotiating the Past in the Present

Viterna argues that, although women were "foundational to the success of the FMLN insurgency," their participation "did not guarantee gender transformations" societally (6). After the war, the men mostly continued to disrespect women, viewing them as their property and the second-tier gender. At this time, it was considered embarrassing for a man to ask for help from a woman. For example, after the death of her husband, the mother is unfairly targeted in the community as a single woman and mother. "Knowing there are no men at home" thieves come after her corn mill to steal food (Hernández 86). They act deliberately and only after her husband's death because they "respected the men's presence" yet "they viewed the women as they had before the war, even though they'd fought beside them, saved their lives on occasion, and could even kill

them now (ibid). This equally points to the poverty and desperation post-conflict because those who rob her only do so because they have limited options: "their children are hungry" since unsuccessful harvests forced them to sell the parcels of land they were given (Hernández 87). After the war, many people were cheated of the pensions they were promised, which either arrived late and/or were not the amount initially pledged (88). This reminds the reader of the war's recency and its impacts on the impoverished demographic living in rural El Salvador.

The various characters' storytelling from memory functions to link layers of past-present-future in *Slash and Burn.* Diana Taylor offers a compelling understanding of historical timelines in her article *Performance and/as History*:

> The past might be conceived not only as a timeline-accessed as a leap backward, and forward to the present again – but also as a multilayered sedimentation, a form of vertical density rather than a horizontal sweep – not an either/or but a both/and. (83)

Taylor's notion of the past as "multilayered sedimentation" is highly useful with regards to Hernández's narrative, in which self-referential descriptions of the timeline such as "now, which is to say back then" embrace and amplify the story's isochronous quality (101). Although the younger generation assures the mother that the war is long over, "she's not so sure" and "fear and distrust linger" in their community (Hernández 41).

In the postwar period, psychologists "insisted she had to discuss what she'd seen and heard so her mind could heal" (Hernández 185). However, the mother does not wish to speak to a psychologist because she despises their tone and the way they treat her. To her, being in a "safe, trusted space with them, meant nothing" because she believes the war might not be over "despite what had been announced" and if it restarted "she'd be held accountable" for putting her *compañeros* in danger (184). This points to the lasting trauma of the war and the effects of being

indoctrinated into the insurgency and learning to stay secretive at all costs rather than lose your life – or, worse still, endanger the lives of others. She continues to follow orders "in peacetime as she had during the war" (214). Hernández later reveals that the FMLN ordered its infantry to believe the announcements of peace while remaining skeptical. Her own mother questions, "was she going to waste her [energy] on suffering over things that would never happen and following orders that no longer made sense?" (Hernández 267) This highlights the mother's identity conflict in the post-war period

The women in this novel are presented as the bearers of El Salvador's history. To return briefly to the theme of survival, many of the female characters view having children as a way of surviving beyond death, which was "an everyday thing then" (Hernández 295). For one woman,[9] "expecting a daughter was a way to survive, to perpetuate yourself" since the future did not exist at war (162). Likewise, when the mother discovers her firstborn is expecting a baby of her own, she feels hopeful that it will lessen her daughter's depression. However, the fate of the mother's practically non-existent relationship with her biological "lost" daughter is a metaphorical representation of coming to terms with the war and its lasting trauma. In the end, she buries a stone in place of her baby whom she lost the moment she was torn from her arms (266). Through a depiction of motherhood that highlights the pregnancies and childbirth stories for every daughter born, these female characters are portrayed as the resilient and regenerative life force of the nation. Readers are called to identify with these women by witnessing their daily lives set against a quiet but unforgettable backdrop of unimaginable loss and suffering.

Part IV: Bearing Witness

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[9] She is the mother's ex-compañera-in-combat, whom she met in a demobilization camp.

The notion of 'bearing witness' is a common thread among scholars who have evaluated testimonio's value as a political tool. Testimonial accounts can create a transformative bearing witness in its ability to move the reader, potentially triggering advocacy, responsibility, and accountability" (Whitlock 9). This witnessing occurs on two interactive levels, the first, being the testimonial author recounting events that they witnessed, the second, being the reader witnessing from a distance what was experienced. The language of *bearing* witness connotes a weight attached to the responsibility and affect following the transfer of knowledge or witnessing of events. The core of this concept is transferring or depositing traumatic experiences onto another "who cannot be annihilated by them" (Amir 6). Likewise, much of *Slash and Burn* unfolds as a witnessing of events on multiple levels. The reader accesses key information related to occurrences through characters witnessing what is happening or stories being recounted. For instance, the mother's first pregnancy is revealed through the lost daughter hearing the story and experiencing her thoughts and feelings as she processes the story of her birth, at least, based on the somewhat limited details her biological mother chooses to share with her (Hernández 58).

Whitlock describes testimonial discourse as a dynamic and interactive rhetorical appeal to an addressee, in other words, a text in search of witnesses (8). Testimonio requires active and participatory readers or listeners (Reyes and Rodriguez 527). In the same vein, *Slash and Burn* demands an active reading because understanding who is being narrated and following the digressive, asynchronous plot requires additional effort. Hernández does not utilize a representative individual in the form of a single protagonist, rather, a constellation of characters are identified through their relationships to each other inviting the reader to recognize the connections between people, communities, and driving forces of change. Beverley argues that testimonio's use is concretely related to "the possibility of interpellating our students in a relation

of solidarity with liberation movements and human rights struggles" (Through All Things Modern 3). Building on this, Avila, a member of the Latina Feminist Group, argues that women standing together and telling their truths gives "valor to each other's stories" (299).

In contrast, the mother in *Slash and Burn* values her privacy and "didn't want a bunch of strangers to witness something that didn't concern them. The circumstances of her personal life belonged only to her" (Hernández 13). Although, the *señora* she hires to look after her daughters believes that sharing her story's "most sorrowful moments" is an easy method of acquiring donations, the mother refuses to beg in the streets or request money from strangers (Hernández 13). It is a matter of "dignity" that the mother will not ask for, or even accept money or other forms of help (Hernández 82). These values were also instilled in her during her time spent in the guerrilla camps. Therefore, when the daughter attending university seeks help from the foreign donor who funded her mother's trip to Paris, she does so secretly, knowing her mother would disapprove. Having been kicked out of her student accommodations in the capital, the young woman calls the donor for help and "after hearing the full story, she said not to worry" offering to help secure more stable accommodations this time (Hernández 144). This moment highlights the significance of sharing one's story and how "testimonio is not meant to be hidden, made intimate, nor kept secret" (Reyes and Rodriguez 525). Additionally, the mother asks herself why her daughters could not appreciate the sacrifices she'd made, "in part, because she'd never shared the particulars" with them (Hernández 124). That period in their mother's life "filled her with sadness" and the fact that she "preferred not to dwell on it" is the extent of the daughters' knowledge regarding her time at war (125). Again, this implicitly points to the importance of sharing one's story to breed understanding and build chains of solidarity.

The Latina Feminist Group has described testimonio as a “crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (2). By purposefully centering women who have historically been relegated to the margin, this novel is dedicated to making visible an entire demographic that contributed not only to the revolution but to re-building the nation post-conflict. Telling the unheard stories of women guerrilla fighters subverts traditional or mainstream inherently androcentric historical narratives.

Conclusion

Slash and Burn constitutes a work of fiction that is part of a contemporary generation’s movement to find creative ways of engaging with the past. This novel engages with testimonio through its production of collective (feminine) voices, orality, and thematic content including war, identity, poverty, legitimacy, and political consciousness. Purposefully centering the previously marginalized voices of women effectively captures the significance of the intersection between the personal and the political. As a fictional text adopting the narrative strategies of testimonio, *Slash and Burn* extends beyond its predecessor’s limits, shedding light on many voices through a style that echoes a stream of consciousness. This text surpasses an individual account of history by including multiple anonymous voices that proliferate the story tenfold and branch off into a collective web of relations involving people *and* land. The absence of proper nouns and dialogue decentralizes the narrative, giving equal voice to the collective yet non-homogenized experiences of El Salvador’s rural population. Prioritizing the collective whole via metonymic reading emulates grassroots feminist methods and subverts Western traditions rooted in individuality and androcentrism. As María Teresa Tula so well describes: “our struggle as women comes together with our struggle for change in El Salvador… If there isn’t drastic social change in our country, then we will always be oppressed” (125). In inviting an active reading, the novel’s reception is

ultimately about imaginatively reconstructing the memories and present predicament of families and communities living in post-war El Salvador.

Hernández closes *Slash and Burn* in a future storyline, unmentioned previously, in which the mother and her daughters demand that “the tractor operators [who] came to build over their land” build elsewhere, refusing to give up the land for which she fought so hard. The land has always been at the heart of the issue, and, in this respect, El Salvador is not alone. Its most popular exports, sugar and coffee, have been commodities in extremely high global demand ever since Spain colonized the region. This, in addition to thoughts on having “lost the war,” are a sobering reminder that the exploitative conditions leading to the civil war are ongoing. Although this essay discusses a national history and its trauma, *Slash and Burn,* in its anonymity and decentralization, transcends borders, reminding the reader that the civil war and its aftermath cannot be removed from the global political and economic context that protects the interests of the wealthy by prioritizing profit and maximizing efficiency above all else. We must bear witness not only to the legacies of war and the resistance of marginalized groups, but to our complicity in the oppressive interlocking systems of capitalism and patriarchy.

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