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Blood in the Water: Salvadoran Rivers of Testimony and Resistance

Adrian Taylor Kane

From the 1970s to the early 1990s the dominant forms of literary production in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua were testimonial literature and literature of resistance.[1] During this time period, all three of these Central American countries were embroiled in bloody civil wars, and the written word was employed on the cultural front as a means of denouncing and resisting various forms of oppression. For both historical and artistic reasons, rivers frequently play an important role in cultural production from and about this era and have thus become embedded in the complex web of ideological signifiers that comprises the discursive practices of Central American literature.[2] In the two works of poetry analyzed in the present essay, "Réquiem para el Sumpul" (1983) (Requiem for the Sumpul) by Mercedes Durand and *Swimming in El Río Sumpul* (2005) by Elsie B.C. Rivas Gómez, the river figures prominently. "Réquiem para el Sumpul," published toward the beginning of El Salvador's civil war in an anthology whose stated mission was to call attention to the violent realities of Central America, lends itself to analysis through theories of testimonial writing. In my analysis of Durand's poem, I thus argue that her use of the river fortifies the poem's testimonial discourse and further opens the possibility of a new reading of testimonial texts in which the representation of place becomes an indispensable element.[3] I approach Rivas Gómez's *Swimming in El Río Sumpul*, constructed as a return to the site of violence many years after the end of the armed conflict, through the lens of trauma studies, maintaining that the river in this text becomes a powerful metaphor for the psychological and physical wounds inflicted during the war. By analyzing the use of such imagery in these poems, I ultimately argue that, through a variety of uses including metaphor, mythology, personification, and symbolism, rivers play

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a central role in creating an aesthetic of resistance in both texts.

The Sumpul River is the primary image of Durand's testimonial poem "Réquiem para el Sumpul," which was written as a denunciation of the massacre that occurred on May 14, 1980, in the river that serves as a border with Honduras, where six hundred *campesinos* were slaughtered as they attempted to flee to Honduras to escape a military operation (LaFeber 250).[4] As a crucial component of the poem's testimonial rhetoric, "Réquiem" inevitably portrays the river as the place where the killing occurred but also takes advantage of its rich potential for symbolism in order to more effectively elicit the horror of the event.

The first stanza, for example, employs the conventional use of the river as a symbol of life and nourishment, but subsequently undermines that convention by converting the river into a symbol of death. The poem begins with the imagery of birds peacefully drinking from the river's water and trees thriving on its banks. The poetic voice recalls the many times that the local children washed themselves of their sins in the river, thus evoking the Christian sacrament of baptism and reinforcing the river's association with life. The image of children playing in the river and on its banks similarly suggests innocence, joy and recreation. However, the initial imagery of life, purity, and innocence comes to an abrupt halt halfway through the first stanza. The pivotal verse "Pero ahora tus aguas se han tornado distintas" (8) (But now your waters are different) clearly delineates the present and the past, alluding to a traumatic experience that has forever changed the character of the river.[5] It thus foreshadows the shift in symbolism that is about to occur in the subsequent series of macabre visions in which the river harbors skulls and bones while vultures gorge on intestines amidst mountains of rotting flesh. Through these images, the river is transformed into a symbol of death by portraying it as a receptacle for human remains and associating it with the image of scavenger birds that feed on dead organisms. The effect of such a marked contrast between the river's symbolism at the beginning and at the end of the first stanza enhances the poem's testimonial discourse by underscoring the psychological disruption and physical devastation wrought by the massacre.

In the second stanza the poem returns to and elaborates the traumatic nucleus that is initially left as a gap. These verses that describe the dismembered corpses of men, women, and children falling into the river bear witness to the indiscriminate violence of the massacre, thus denouncing the Salvadoran government's campaign of destruction against its own *campesino* population. In doing so, they offer a rewriting of the official history provided by Salvadoran President José Napoleon Duarte, who, in his comments about the Sumpul massacre, stated that "about 300 were killed, all of them 'Communist guerrillas'" (qtd. in Chomsky 112). By emphasizing that these were men, women, and children (rather than communist guerrillas) who were murdered and by portraying *them*, rather than the army, as the just

ones, "seiscientos justos" (six hundred just ones), this stanza also confronts the official discourse of the Salvadoran military, which attempted to portray anyone who dared to question the status quo as an enemy of the state (28).[6] Durand thus offers a rewriting of official discourse in which the Salvadoran soldiers, not the people, are the country's enemy. In testifying to the basic facts of the massacre and resisting the official history and discourse of the national government, these verses follow some of the standard functions of testimonial writing.

The following stanza, however, offers a unique departure from conventional concepts of testimonial discourse by personifying the Sumpul as a "río testigo" (33) (witness river).[7] Both John Beverley and George Yúdice, who have provided two of the clearest attempts to propound a concept of *testimonio* (testimony), include in their definitions the presence of a human subject as narrator. For Yúdice, this narrator is "a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation" (44). Similarly, in Beverley's view *testimonio* is an account "told in the first person by a narrator who is also a real protagonist or witness of the event he or she recounts" ("Margin at the Center" 31). This is critical to his notion of *testimonio* because the central role of the witness/narrator allows for the "erasure of the function . . . of the author" (35). This element, he argues, is part of the anti-literary nature of *testimonio*, which is concerned more with sincerity than literariness (32).[8] These definitions are particularly useful for distinguishing *testimonio* from traditional literary genres. However, the emphasis that has rightfully been given to the human subject of testimony as occupying a subaltern space in society has perhaps caused critics to overlook the importance of place in testimonial discourse. For, as J.E. Malpas has convincingly argued, it is "in the dense structure of place that subjectivity is embedded and, inasmuch as subjectivity is only to be found within such a structure, so there is a necessary dependence of subjectivity on the other elements within that structure and on the structure as a whole" (175). This important aspect of human subjectivity reminds us that memory is not only ordered temporally but also spatially (176). Thus, the analysis of place in testimonial discourse, based primarily on memory, holds great potential for providing a more profound understanding of the oppressive situation that is being narrated. In "Réquiem," Durand's characterization of the place of the massacre as a witness intimates that the nonhuman natural world does, indeed, contribute to testimonial discourse.

Her portrayal of the Sumpul as witness is multifaceted and complex. The river is personified throughout the poem, but its actions evolve from subtle at the outset to aggressive by the conclusion. In the first two stanzas, the Sumpul is portrayed as a testimonial landscape that tells El Salvador's story of systematic violence, torture, and political assassination through its altered physical appearance. The blood in the water, the cadavers and dislocated human remains that it holds, as well as the scavengers that engulf

it are stark reminders that nature is not merely a backdrop for human oppression. To the contrary, the places of the nonhuman natural world in which these acts occur are inseparable from the story of human oppression. Bullet holes in trees, scorched forests, and craters in the earth caused by bombs are all ways in which nature itself becomes a narrative agent that writes the history of human violence. Just as Durand's text rewrites the official history and discourse of the government, the river itself, as physical evidence, resists the silence that the ruling junta attempted to impose on anyone who dared to challenge its ideology.

Another important aspect of the river's constantly changing complexion is its portrayal as an agent of collective memory and identity.[9] This characterization, consistent with the role of testimonial witness, follows Edward Casey's notion of place as simultaneously physical, psychical, cultural, historical, and social and also coincides with his view that places possess "a power of gathering" that includes keeping thoughts and memories (334, 328). Durand's testimonial river gathers the memory of the men, women, and children who were murdered in its water by portraying it as a collective prayer for the dead: "Tu caudal ya es un réquiem / dolorido y austero" (51–52) (Your flow is now a requiem / painful and austere). It is thus designated as a "deathscape" in the most general sense of a place associated with death but also as a memorial site with deep symbolic meaning (Maddrell and Sidaway 4). As the poem's title indicates, the river's speech moves from the idyllic image of the babbling brook to a prayer for the dead men, women, and children who were slaughtered in its waters. Therefore, as witness, agent of memory, and site of mourning, the Sumpul is textually bound in Durand's poem to the memory of the massacre.

The idea that the river "belongs" to all Salvadorans accentuates the collective aspect of its testimony. Indeed, by personifying the Sumpul as a "río doliente, / río sepulturero" (31–32) (suffering river, / river of burial) the river performs the same actions that tens of thousands of citizens were forced to carry out, for those who survived the violence of the civil war were left to mourn and bury their loved ones and to attest to their life and death. In this sense, the river becomes identified with their collective suffering. This potent image of the river as the collective identity of a suffering Salvadoran people potentially strengthens the complicity between the reader and the community in question. For, as Doris Sommer maintains, "once the subject of the testimonial is understood as the community made up of a variety of roles, the reader is called in to fill one of them" (44). The powerful vision of the river as a suffering, burying witness underscores the community roles of the survivors and, in this sense, may emphasize the collective aspect of testimonial discourse more effectively than *testimonio* itself.

Moreover, the river in "Réquiem" enhances the consciousness-raising element that is critical to testimonial discourse. By portraying the river, a collective resource, as a medium of testimony, Durand implies that the

importance of the Sumpul massacre has broad implications for El Salvador and the other Central American nations that were experiencing similar forms of oppression and that this story urgently needs to be told.[10] The poem elevates the reader's awareness of the event not only by bearing witness to the facts of the massacre but also by drawing on the pre-Columbian mythology of Cuscatlán. Specifically, Durand incorporates the mythological character Cipitín, who, according to the legend, is abandoned as a child by his mother la Siguanaba when she leaves home to have an extramarital affair. For many years Cipitín, perpetually ten years old, lives hidden in the brush alongside a river, where young girls bring him flowers in hopes that he will come out to play, but one day he encloses himself in a cave with his girlfriend, never to be heard from again (Espino 36–39). In "Réquiem," Cipitín suddenly emerges from his sarcophagus in a fit of rage to mourn the victims of the Sumpul massacre. The image of Cipitín in anguish presents a stark contrast to his traditional characterization as a lighthearted prankster. Durand thus emphasizes the traumatic effect of the killings through a character familiar to Salvadorans as part of their collective oral tradition. Furthermore, Cipitín's awakening in "Réquiem" implies that the massacre was so horrific that it demands an immediate awakening to the unjust military policy of the ruling junta.

Critics who view the testimonial word as a pure form of summoning truth might view such a mythological reference as overly literary and therefore a distraction. However, as Elzbieta Sklodowska points out, these same scholars have tended to "overcompensate for the internal discord" in specific texts ("Spanish American Testimonial Novel" 97). The Rigoberta Menchú controversy, for example, teaches us that subaltern strategies for making truth claims may differ from hegemonic notions of testimony.[11] With respect to Menchu's testimony, Arturo Arias argues that she is performing an ethnic identity as part of a "strategic discourse to prevent the continued genocide of her people" (*Taking their Word* 98). Arias follows Beverley's contention that what is of interest in *testimonio* is not a reproduction of historical data but rather the "reality effect" that is produced ("Margin at the Center" 40). Therefore, argues Arias, how truth is constructed in these texts is the prerogative of the narrating subject who need not be beholden to a Western conception of rationality (102). The inclusion of mythological characters and river witnesses, as we see in "Réquiem," may not fall within conventional Western practices of legal or historical testimony. However, if the objective of testimonial discourse is to bear witness to and create awareness of a historical situation of oppression, these devices are indeed an effective rhetorical strategy.

Durand's rendering of the river as a testimonial place is also an indisputably important element of the rhetoric of "Réquiem." For, as Casey asserts, "places not only are, they happen. (And it is because they happen that they lend themselves so well to narration, whether as history or as

story)" (330). Following this concept of place, I would argue that allowing place to narrate in "Réquiem" enhances the testimonial discourse in two ways. First, the reader is presented with the image of the river writing the story of the massacre through the evidence offered in its altered physical appearance. This strengthens the text's reality effect by suggesting that nature corroborates the poetic voice's testimony. Moreover, in a literary sense, the river reflects the various psychological stages that the human witnesses to the massacre may have passed through—from innocence (prior to the trauma) to consciousness of the event, outrage, and, finally, action.[12] Portraying the Sumpul as a place that not only testifies to a grave occurrence but also reacts to it can be understood as an attempt to compel the reader to identify with the transformation of the river and thus follow a similar course. The final stage of this process, action, is evident in the concluding verses, which offer one last transmutation of the river's metaphorical meaning and make clear that the tone of the river's prayer is one of rage rather than resignation. The Sumpul winds in anger with impatient leaps and fierce waves, promising to overflow its banks in torrents of blood (54–58). The river is portrayed as a witness to crimes against humanity earlier in the poem, but these images of vengeance indicate that it will not be a passive bystander in the struggle for justice in El Salvador. The Sumpul has thus been transfigured into a river of revolt against the status quo. Following Casey's contention that places reflect the character of their occupants, the changed physiognomy of the river described in these verses can be read as the local inhabitants' awakening to the necessity of the revolution (330).

The final stanza thus calls to mind Max Horkheimer's notion of the "revolt of nature" from his seminal treatise *Eclipse of Reason*. For Horkheimer, reason in industrialized society is merely an instrument of domination that constantly forces individuals to repress their natural desires by conforming for the sake of self-preservation (97, 105, 110). He argues, however, that "resistance and revulsion arising from this repression of nature have beset civilization from its beginnings, in the form of social rebellions . . . as well as in the form of individual crime and mental derangement" (94). Nature, according to this perspective, is not an "other" that exists in opposition to humans. Indeed, it is *in* us.[13]

When one considers Horkheimer's notion of the revolt of nature in conjunction with the fact that many Central American military governments of the 1970s and 1980s were the ideological descendants of the positivist liberal dictators of the late 1800s and early 1900s who governed with the precepts of "order and progress," Durand's image of a river in revolt acquires a new possible meaning. That is, in addition to the river as a witness to the massacre who cannot sit idly by, it reflects the reaction of an impoverished people who have suffered from liberal economic policies that were sold as a form of civilization and national progress but were designed for the benefit of an elite minority.[14] The image of the river's violent

uprising thus becomes a metaphor for both nonhuman nature and the nature that resides within us. The implication is that the revolution is not only justified but is also natural.[15] By concluding with this image of nature's revolt, Durand's poem validates the struggle for liberation, suggesting that the violent oppression of the Salvadoran people runs contrary to the desire for liberty found both in inner human nature and in the external order of the nonhuman natural world.

The final image of the river's revolt also suggests an intersection with Barbara Harlow's concept of resistance literature as literary works whose authors are writing in the context of organized national liberation movements and "comprehend the role of culture and cultural resistance as part of the larger struggle for liberation" (10). By portraying the anti-government resistance as a revolt of nature and thus affirming its necessity, "Réquiem" enters into the literary "arena of struggle" against "policies of imperialism, colonialism, and underdevelopment" that constitutes resistance literature (2, 29). Durand thus joins the ranks of Roque Dalton, Sergio Ramírez, Gioconda Belli, and other Central American authors whose work Harlow cites as examples of resistance literature in which the emphasis is on "the political as the power to change the world" (30).[16]

The testimonial aspect of "Réquiem" is inseparable from its resistance function, for, as Linda Craft has pointed out, testimony itself is a form of protest, but testimonial literature also contains important intersections with trauma (15). In "Réquiem," for example, the complexion and identity of the river have been drastically altered by the trauma caused by the massacre, thus reflecting the way in which the psychology and identity of a human witness often changes as a result of a traumatic experience. Moreover, as Dori Laub astutely observes, victims of trauma often struggle to survive an incident so that they can tell their story but later need to tell their story in order to survive the effects of trauma (63). In other words, the need for testimony frequently arises from the existence of trauma.

The relation between testimony and trauma with respect to the Sumpul massacre becomes evident when one reads "Réquiem" in conjunction with Elsie B.C. Rivas Gómez's, *Swimming in El Río Sumpul* (2005). Part of a generation younger than that of Durand and the other authors mentioned by Harlow, Rivas Gómez presents an alternate mode of resistance to that of "Réquiem" and allows a reading of the same river in a different historical context. Published thirteen years after the end of the civil war, Rivas Gomez's collection is not an ideological weapon in the struggle for national liberation like Durand's but rather a return to the site of trauma portrayed in "Réquiem." Therefore, an approach to *Swimming in El Río Sumpul* through the lens of trauma studies, which seeks to understand the psychological phenomenon of trauma and its intersections with such diverse fields as history, language, and literature, reveals the profound devastation of the massacre and the multiple layers of meaning in its carefully crafted poetic

imagery.

Rivas Gómez, who was born in El Salvador and, as an infant, was forced by the war to relocate with her family to the United States, was inspired to write her collection of poems after visiting the village of Guarjila, Chalatenango, on a trip with a group of students from Santa Clara University. The collection as a whole tells the story of one poetic voice and her experiences and encounters with the people and places in a part of the country that suffered the largest massacre of the civil war. The portrayal of place and the powerful imagery of the river are as central to *Swimming in El Río Sumpul* as they are to "Réquiem."

The first poem of the work, also titled "Swimming in El Río Sumpul," designates the river as a site central to the trauma that is reckoned with throughout the collection. At the beginning of the poem, a group of students walks down the cliff to the water. Twenty years after the tragedy, Rivas Gómez portrays the massacre as no less difficult to comprehend. The group prays but is unable to name what it is they are asking for (6–7). The concept of the ineffable in these verses hints at the inability, which scholars have observed in victims, to assimilate the tragic events at the root of trauma.[17] The suggestion that the students, who did not witness the massacre, are unable to assimilate the event years after its occurrence raises the question of how the survivors of the incident could possibly have been able to do so themselves. The poetic voice appears to be more impacted by the experience of returning to the site of the massacre than the rest of the group, as she sits on a stone while they swim in the river. She contemplates where she was and imagines what the river looked like when the massacres occurred: "On those nights, waters foamed rapid and deep, / a shining gash under an angry moon" (16–17). Here she presents the river as a wound, a powerful metaphor that resonates throughout the collection and unifies it. By referring to "the nights of the massacres" (12) in the plural, the Sumpul massacre is presumably conflated with other mass exterminations during the Civil War, such as El Mozote and El Calabozo. The reference to massacres in the plural, in combination with her rendering of the river as a gash, has the effect of portraying not just the Sumpul massacre but the entire war as a collective national wound.

This image of the river as gash evokes *trauma* in its original Greek meaning of a wound "originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body" as well as its use in modern psychology "as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3). Wounds to the body testify to past events as tangible signifiers of violence, and, although the bloody water, mutilated cadavers, and vultures have long since disappeared from sight, the metaphor of the river as wound suggests that, whether open or closed, it continues to be a reminder of the massacre for the poetic voice.[18] Indeed, by alternating between past and present, "Swimming in El Río Sumpul" evokes varying images of the river as metaphorical

wound. In the past the wound is physical and open. In the present it is psychological and submerged. For the poetic voice in "Swimming," the psychological wound has clearly still not healed. Her own desire to drown indicates the level of anguish that the massacre created, even for those who were not present, thus reaffirming the collective impact of the violence. Despite the encouragement of her friends, she chooses for a second time to not wade into the water, imagining the massacre as waves of blood that washed out the bridge (29–30). The forceful flow of blood and water here, powerful enough to destroy a bridge, once again evokes the image of a physical wound, a reference to the violence that caused the psychological wound.

Rivas Gómez strikes a delicate balance between the use of the wound in the abstract, metaphorical sense and its use in the literal sense—namely that hundreds of human beings, most of who eventually died, suffered real physical pain. She achieves this in the final stanza, for example, by weaving a maelstrom of images, including disjointed body parts, into the superficially calm waters of the present. Among the items found swimming in the river are "elbows bricks eyes rust hair / socks bullets bubbles cries dirt" as well as the ghosts of the living and the dead (45–46). The human remains in this passage, hidden below the river's surface rather than strewn across its rocks and banks, leave no doubt as to the physical suffering that occurred on May 14, 1980. Moreover, their fragmented representation creates an aesthetic of dislocation that alludes to the psychological trauma of a community and its families torn asunder by hundreds of sudden, violent deaths. That these body parts, objects, and phantasms lurk below the surface of the water suggests a parallel between their location and the psychological space of the human subconscious, where trauma resides and recurrently resurfaces. The ghosts of the survivors that inhabit the river thus become metaphors for trauma in the sense of "the literal return of the event against the will of the one it inhabits" (Caruth, *Trauma* 5). Their presence beneath the surface of the otherwise "calm waters" (39) suggests a further similarity with the victims of trauma whose wounds are not visible but are equally as real as a gash in the flesh.

The image of the ghosts of the dead from the above passage captures Rivas Gómez's overall representation of the Sumpul as a place that is bound to the memory of the massacre and its victims. In the context of a postwar Central America in which dictators, generals, and soldiers walk freely among the citizens whose family members they tortured, raped, and murdered, the act of remembering embodied in the writing of the poem becomes an act of political resistance, a struggle "set against oblivion and for justice . . . as a strategy to avoid the repetition, to denounce the violation of human rights, and to pay tribute to the victims" (Portela 161). The conglomeration of body parts, objects, and ghosts in the water indicates that the river still tells the story of the violence that occurred there. It continues

to testify, as it does in Durand's poem, but now as a scar rather than an open wound gushing torrents of blood. The urgency of the call for revolt may have passed, but "Swimming in El Río Sumpul" is nevertheless a testimony both in Laub's sense of a historical recovery that resists the annihilation of the victims' identities (67, 70) and in Craft's sense as a protest that gives voice to the voiceless (15). The historical recovery is present in the poem in the act of remembering, which is rendered by the image of the poetic voice sitting taciturnly on a stone gazing at the river and reading it as a repository for memory. The protest is implied in the poet's inscription of the memory, an act that refuses to allow the massacre to slip into oblivion. Given the poem's title, the reader might expect that the poetic voice would eventually decide to swim and, in doing so, restore the river's conventional symbolism as a place of recreation and spiritual healing. However, her decision not to swim can be understood as an act of resistance in which she insists on the importance of remembering.

If the central image of "Swimming in El Río Sumpul" is the poetic voice reading the river, in the collection's next poem, "Testimonios," the act of listening is brought to the fore. This poem, which begins, "Each day we hear more stories. / Sometimes we ask for them," serves as a transition from the collective suffering of the Salvadoran people in "Swimming in El Río Sumpul" to the specific memories of individual survivors captured in subsequent poems (1–2). In these poems, Rivas Gómez tells of the stories that had a powerful impact on her during her stay in Guarjila. They include recollections of a newlywed couple shot dead by military helicopters on their wedding night, mothers and children searching for loved ones' graves to give them a proper burial, a young boy kidnapped by soldiers from his home in front of his mother, another boy who lost his hand in a grenade explosion, and orphans forced into refugee camps in Honduras. The collection's unifying motif of the wound, initiated in the first poem through the image of the river, is continued in "Testimonios," both by describing the physical wounds of the dead and by listening to the psychological wounds of the living.

The process of the poet listening to the testimonies of the survivors evokes Cathy Caruth's articulation of trauma narrative as the voice of the wound. That is, trauma not only as:

> the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound. (*Unclaimed Experience* 8)

The experience that Caruth describes here is precisely what makes *Swimming in El Río Sumpul* such a profound text. That is, it captures the

poetic voice's encounters with the suffering of others in such a way that all of the layers of difference that separate the two subjects are removed in order to reveal their common human fragility. This process is replicated, albeit in a more mediated and literary form, in the encounter between reader and text. Through Rivas Gómez's poetry, the reader too becomes a listener to the voice of the wound.

Despite the traumatic memories that emerge from the voice of the wound in *Swimming in El Río Sumpul*, Rivas Gómez also creates several images of hope that echo the utopian impulse that underpins much of Latin American literature.[19] In "Resurrecting the Disappeared," for example, after discovering her daughter's remains in an unmarked grave, a mother reburies her daughter in her own garden. In the concluding verse, the poetic voice signals the possibility of once again finding beauty in life: "Red flowers will burst from their graves" (31). But the collection's most potent image of hope is found in "Las mujeres." In this poem, the poetic voice is embarrassed when Liliana, a Salvadoran woman who has adopted eight children orphaned by the war, insists on helping her hand wash the blood from her panties: "She is accustomed to the smell of blood under her nails, / knows that life springs from the deepest wounds" (42–43). In this stanza, the metaphorical wound initiated in "Swimming in El Río Sumpul" acquires a new meaning as a vehicle for transcendence and a means for new life. For, as Shoshana Felman submits, "the Christian figure of the wound, [is] traditionally viewed as the mythic vehicle and as the metaphoric means for a *historical transcendence*—for the erasure of Christ's death in the advent of Resurrection" (36, emphasis in original). This Christian concept of the wound takes on particular significance in *Swimming in El Río Sumpul* when one considers the crucial role that Catholic liberation theology played in shaping Central American revolutionary discourse. According to this theology, the church (understood as Christ's body) must work for social justice to alleviate the suffering of the poor and the oppressed. In the end, the wounds acquired in the struggle will allow a transcendence of these forms of suffering through social transformation. This concept is present in the above verses from "Mujeres" as well as "The Stations," in which Rivas Gómez writes of the fourteen sketches of tortured Salvadorans that adorn the walls of the local chapel in lieu of the customary Stations of the Cross. The implication of the sketches is that the wounds of the tortured victims, like Christ's wounds, are part of a struggle for liberation from suffering. Including these slivers of hope found among the morbid testimonies of the survivors is ultimately a form of resistance. By suggesting the possibility of a new life for the Salvadoran people and a new hope for constructing a more just society, these images reject the military's attempt to annihilate the utopian ideals of the revolution.

The multiple layers of meaning in the image of the river as wound, with its historical, physical, psychological, spiritual, and political implications,

enhance the testimonial discourse of *Swimming in El Río Sumpul*. As poetic renderings (with literary intentions and authorial intervention), these poems differ from the concepts of *testimonio* elaborated by Beverley and Yúdice. Nevertheless, they form part of a larger corpus of testimonial literature by documenting the stories of the survivors and attesting to the government's attempt to destroy the community of Guarjila. The subjectivity of the witnesses of Rivas Gómez's testimonial poems are firmly embedded in a place whose identity has been constructed as a site of physical destruction and psychological trauma. The river, the community's most visible landmark associated with the violence, is portrayed as a place of trauma, memory, suffering, and possible future transcendence. Following Sklodowska's suggestion that it would be appropriate for critics to view testimonial texts as constructed artifacts, one sees that not only is the river essential to Rivas Gómez's text for historical reasons, but also that, as a poetic device, it elicits the range of devastating ramifications of the violence that the collection bears witness to ("Poetics of Remembering" 251–52).

The return to this important place in Central American history carries several implications with it. First, it allows the poet, and thus the reader, to listen to the wounds of the survivors. These stories provide evidence of the continued effect of the incomprehensible violence and destruction of this period in Salvadoran history, thus confirming Caruth's assertion that stories of trauma attest to the ongoing impact of trauma on a life (*Unclaimed Experience* 7). Furthermore, the return itself in *Swimming in El Río Sumpul,* can be understood as the physical act of remembering, and thus a form of resistance in the sense described previously by M. Edurne Portela. Listening and remembering are also part of a broader historical implication of the return to the Sumpul. For Salvadoran author Mario Bencastro, who has written a testimonial novella about his country's river massacres, literature does not return to the past to stagnate it or to open old wounds, "but rather to assure that those wounds scar adequately through study, meditation and understanding of the facts and their consequences, so that we may then come to the firm determination that history must not be repeated because the human cost is too great" (108).[20] Rivas Gómez's collection in its entirety achieves this goal by poetically rendering the stories of survivors of the war and eloquently revealing the human cost.

When these poems are read together with "Réquiem para el Sumpul," it becomes clear that both works use the river as a powerful rhetorical device to counter imposed silences.[21] With specific regard to the Sumpul massacre, this function becomes all the more important when one considers that, as Chomsky points out, the story was suppressed by the U.S. media for more than a year, "and then only barely noted" (105). Both poems are thus important examples of the way in which rivers, for both historical and literary reasons, are embedded in Central American testimonial discourse. As physical places and constantly morphing metaphors and symbols, they

have become integrated into "the textual itinerary of insistently recurring words" that comprises Central American stories of testimony and trauma (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 5). Rivers thus figure prominently in the intellectual imaginary of artists who were and are committed to breaking imposed silences by creating works of testimony and resistance.

Durand's notion of the "río testigo," in which the river itself becomes a medium of testimony, opens the door to a rereading of Latin American testimonial texts in which the concept of place, including the nonhuman natural world, receives much more careful consideration than it has in the past. For if, as Casey reminds us, "there are no lived bodies without the places they inhabit and traverse" (327), and subjectivity is therefore inseparable from place (Malpas 175), then what, for example, do the slave barracks, the coffee plantations, the jungle, and the torture chamber have to contribute to Latin American testimonial discourse? Such readings might provide insightful intersections with the environmental justice orientation that Lawrence Buell views as an important element of "second-wave environmental criticism" and, in general, afford a more profound understanding of testimonial texts.[22] With regard to "Réquiem para el Sumpul" and *Swimming in El Río Sumpul*, there can be no doubt that the river serves as an effective mechanism for articulating the otherwise ineffable horror and complexity of the massacre in such a way that would be impossible through conventional discourse.[23]

Notes

1. I would like to thank María Alicia Garza and the members of the Boise State University Arts and Humanities Institute's Environment and Society research group for their comments on this essay and Catharine E. Wall for introducing me to *Volcán: Poems from Central America*.
2. Further Central American works not analyzed here also support this claim. See Claribel Alegría's "La mujer del Río Sumpul," Ernesto Cardenal's "Ecología," Arturo Arias's *Después de las bombas*, Mario Bencastro's "Había una vez un río," and Luis Mandoki's film *Voces inocentes*.
3. In the introduction to *Volcán: Poems from Central America*, where "Réquiem" was published, Alejandro Murguía writes, "You will find no enchanting country scenes in this anthology, nor the travel-poster images of picturesque villages, pretty women and delicate folk-art. You *will* find the true reality that is hidden behind that façade" (xi, emphasis in original).
4. The massacre came at the height of the political violence in El Salvador. Out of 11,471 violent deaths in 1980 more than 8,000 were recorded as political murders (Booth, Wade, Walker 102). As Noam Chomsky denounces, "The Human Rights office of the Archdiocese of San Salvador tabulated 8,062 murders of 'Persons of the popular and progressive sectors killed for political reasons, not in military confrontations, but as a result of military operations by the Army, Security Forces,

and paramilitary organizations coordinated by the High Command of the Armed Forces'" (15).

5. The English translations from "Réquiem para el Sumpul" are based on Tina Álvarez Robles's in *Volcán*. In certain instances I diverge from her translation.
6. I follow Linda Craft's argument that "resistance texts confront official discourse critically and harshly, offering a rewriting of that discourse" (7).
7. I use the term testimonial discourse following Hugo Achugar's notion to encompass both *testimonio* and other forms of testimonial literature (279).
8. Achugar is not convinced of the anti-literary element of *testimonio*. He maintains that, once the oral enunciation from which testimonial discourse is derived enters into the editorial sphere (often dominated by novelists and journalists), it loses the anti-literary purity that Beverley would like to find in *testimonio* (286–87).
9. This coincides with Yúdice's notion that, in *testimonio*, "the witness portrays his or her own experience as agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity" (44).
10. I draw on Shoshana Felman's observation that, when a human subject decides to become a witness, it implies his or her "unshakeable conviction" that the event "carries historical significance which goes beyond the individual" (31).
11. Rigoberta Menchú's *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) became the target of U.S. anthropologist David Stoll in his 1999 book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. He charges her of lack of truthfulness in parts of her story. The controversy has generated debate on the nature of *testimonio*. See, for example, *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* edited by Arturo Arias.
12. This final stage could include a wide range of actions from telling the story of the massacre to joining the armed resistance movement.
13. This idea of nature corresponds with Casey's argument that "Nature is not just *around* us; or rather, there is *no getting around* nature, which is at all times *under* us, indeed *in* us" (186, emphasis in original).
14. As Horkheimer recognizes, this situation is common of the human condition: "for the majority of mankind, civilization has meant the pressure to grow up to an adult state and responsibility, and still means poverty" (119).
15. For a similar reading of the Mexican Revolution in Agustín Yáñez's *Al filo del agua* (1947) see Mark D. Anderson.
16. The struggle for power in resistance literature is similar to that in Hugo Achugar's (281) and Linda Craft's notions of testimonial discourse (16). With regard to Central America, John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman make an argument that corresponds with Harlow's view of the role of literature in national liberation movements.
17. See Laub (69) and Caruth (*Unclaimed Experience* 5).
18. Here I follow Dennis Patrick Slattery, who asserts that wounds "always tell a story through their opening onto the world" (14).
19. For analysis of the utopian impulse see Beauchesne and Santos, *The Utopian Impulse in Latin America*.
20. Bencastro's short story "Había una vez un río" (Once Upon a River) from his collection *Árbol de la vida* (The Tree of Life) is based on the May 14, 1980 Sumpul River massacre, the December 11, 1981 El Mozote massacre, and the August 22, 1982 El Calabozo massacre (106).
21. Both texts are excellent examples of Nicole Caso's argument that literature can be "a potent tool to counter imposed silences and to write against a univocal perception of historical events in Central America" (15).

22. Buell refers to second-wave environmental criticism as the evolution of an initial concentration on nature-oriented literature and traditional forms of environmental education to a consideration of urban and rural loci, environmental justice, and nature preservation (7).
23. According to Caso, to "expose the ineffable precisely as what cannot be easily captured through conventional discourse" is an important function of Central American literature (3).

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