Strength hidden in weakness: Feminist testimonial fiction in Mexico

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STRENGTH HIDDEN IN WEAKNESS
FEMINIST TESTIMONIAL FICTION IN MEXICO

by
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Testimonio is a Latin-American genre where someone who is illiterate or otherwise unable to tell his or her life story speaks to someone who then writes the account, retaining the informant's words and expressions, editing material gathered during the interview process but not altering it. Testimonial fiction begins in the same way, but the writer changes the factual account of the person's life as told to him or her in order to make it a fictional account. Both testimonio and testimonial fiction have been used throughout Latin America to increase access to literature and history for those very poor who have been excluded from them.

In Mexico, two authors and journalists, Elena Poniatowska and Cristina Pacheco, have used testimonial forms to tell the stories of poor women and to further their own feminist and socialist ideologies.

In Hasta no verte Jesús mío, Elena Poniatowska creates the character Jesusa Palancares based on interviews with Josefina Bórquez. In the creation of Palancares, Poniatowska subsumed Bórquez's motivation and interpretation of her life story in a religious and spiritual context in order to stress a feminist and political one. The final created personage of Jesusa Palancares becomes an amalgam of both Bórquez and Poniatowska.

In Zona de desastre, Cristina Pacheco writes testimonial short fiction about the survivors of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake. Most notably she discusses the horrible working conditions of Mexico City seamstresses that were revealed in the earthquake. Throughout the book Pacheco develops the theme of gain revealed in loss in her effort to support the seamstresses in their fight to form unions and bargain for better working conditions.

Both the oppression of women and the oppression of the poor in Latin America share the condition of marginalization and can thus effectively be portrayed through testimonio and testimonial fiction. Through giving a voice to women unable to speak for themselves, Poniatowska and Pacheco fight against this marginalization, seeking to improve the quality of women's lives through their writing.
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1. Defining Testimonio and Testimonial Fiction

By testimonio I mean 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 a significant life experience. Testimonio may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following textual categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novela-testimonio, non-fiction novel, or "factographic literature". (Beverley 12-13)

This is how John Beverley describes testimonio, a Latin American genre created in the 1960s that is seen as an outgrowth of traditional Latin American non-fiction narratives, such as war diaries and accounts of revolutionary struggles, colonial crónicas, and costumbrista essays, and anthropological life histories done through the use of taped interviews. Testimonio has also been influenced by the reception of such works as Miguel Barnet's Autobiography of a Runaway Slave, considered to be testimonio, and to a lesser extent North American non-fiction novels, such as Truman Capote's In Cold Blood (Beverley 13-14).

According to Fernández Olmos, the growth of the testimonial genre in Latin America is largely due to the outgrowth of the traditional Latin American forms and to Latin American historical fiction even though the genesis of
testimonio occurred at the same time as the North American non-fiction novel, because their reasons for being are very different:

Whereas mistrust of individual interpretations and personal visions of reality spurred the creation of the nonfiction novel in the United States, in Latin America the testimonial genre is more a continuation and variation of the traditionally documentary nature of Latin American historical fiction; in this new form, however, the fictionalized characters of history have been replaced by its actual participants who now express their own reality. (185)

It is through this characteristic, that of participants in history expressing the events they have witnessed in their own words, that testimonio most radically departs from traditional historical fiction, becoming a separate genre. By allowing the real people who become characters in the text to speak in their own words, the author's presence is diminished as the sole motivating force of the text. The author becomes an editor or compiler for his or her subjects, helping their story be told, but not creating or telling it. An example of testimonio familiar to many English-speaking readers is the work translated into English as *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984), in which Menchú, nobel-prize winning Quiché political activist, tells of her life and her people's political and cultural oppression. Although the book was edited and organized by anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-
Debray, who interviewed Menchú in Paris during a week in 1982, the words are Menchú's, and her story was not altered by the anthropologist who helped her publish it (Burgos-Debray xv-xxi).

As mentioned in Beverley's definition, there is also a fictionalized form of testimonio called novela-testimonio or testimonial fiction in which an author begins with the interview process used in the creation of testimonio and then fictionalizes the account, adding or subtracting characters at will, changing, inventing, deleting, so that what began as a documentary form becomes a work of art. It still reflects historical reality in the life of the person who is it's source, but also reflects the author's motivations and style. This form has developed at the same time as testimonio, and some of the authors/compilers of testimonio have also written testimonial fiction. One example is Miguel Barnet, known for his testimonio, Autobiography of a Runaway Slave (1968) and for his testimonial novel, La canción de Rachel (1970). In "La novela testimonio. Socio-literatura," Barnet gives his view of what this form should be:

... la novela testimonio debía ser un documento a la manera de un fresco, reproduciendo o recreando -- quiero subrayar esto último -- aquellos hechos sociales que marcaran verdaderos hitos en la cultura de un país. . . . Y no son hechos marginales, aislados, sino connociones sociales, hechos colectivos, épicos, que sólo
Barnet's guidelines for writers of *novela-testimonio* raise many questions, among which are: What constitutes a truly representative protagonist for this form? Traditionally, history is seen from the point of view of the privileged classes, for these are the people with the ability to write and thus be recorded. Examples as disparate as officers' letters from the battlefield from any war and the incessant correspondence of Spain's Philip II survive to give their view of the current events of their times, creating much of our written historical record. However, with few exceptions, neither the soldier nor the monarch lived a life that was truly representative of how the majority of his contemporaries lived. Both may have been greatly isolated from the struggles and beliefs of their contemporaries because of their relatively privileged status, due to their sex, relative wealth, and social position. *Testimonio, novela-testimonio*, and other forms of testimonial literature are a way of writing history as seen through the eyes of a very different sort of protagonist: the common person suffering through the changes of history, rather than the leader who directs them from above. In this manner, *testimonio* and testimonial fiction represent a more open and
democratic approach to the writing of history and literature, opening them up to the voices of those normally excluded (Beverley 17): the illiterate poor, linguistic and cultural minorities within a dominant culture, the working class, and poor women, even more invisible to the traditional historian than poor men because of their lack of an active role in public life. These are the people who fit Barnet's qualification of being representational best, for their experience is typical of the majority of their contemporaries who suffer with them.

If these are the protagonists of testimonio and testimonial fiction, what then are its goals? According to Beverley, testimonio reflects the intention of its narrator, ". . . an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself" (14). That the narrator is a real person chronicling real events that may still be occurring at the time the testimonio reaches the reader makes the genre all the more effective in communicating social problems and need for change to a reader otherwise removed from them. According to Doris Sommer:

. . . the testimonial produces complicity. Even if -- perhaps because -- the reader cannot identify with the writer enough to imagine taking her place, the map of possible identifications through the text spreads out laterally. 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. (118)

It is this sense of complicity between narrator and reader that has made testimonio such a powerful vehicle for social change in Latin America, exemplified by its use by the Sandinista Cultural Ministry in Nicaragua (Randall 21) as well as by Rigoberta Menchú to draw attention to and gain support for their political struggles. As seen by its use in these contexts, testimonio in Latin America tends to promote a predominately Marxist and or socialist ideology involving the eventual goal of the destruction of current economic class differences and the poverty and misery that are seen as their result. This is seen especially in the works of Cuban writers and critics such as Victor Casaus, who praises testimonio for its political value in the struggle against imperialism (330-331). In addition, it is seen in testimonio's development as a genre, as Cuba's Casa de las Américas was the first to recognize it as such in 1970 by awarding a prize for testimonio in its annual literary contest (Beverley 13).

If such is the case for testimonio, it is also true for testimonial fiction, which in spite of its fictionalized nature produces the same effect as truth in the reader because of its factual basis and historical immediacy
(Valdés 150). This makes testimonio and testimonial fiction useful forms for anyone working to replace traditional interpretations of history, based on predominantly privileged, upper-class, masculine informants, with a more comprehensive view based on informants more typical of the majority of people, including poor illiterate men and women. According to Fernández Olmos:

One example of the way in which feminism in Latin America is contributing to the area of women's research and responding to the issue of standards and criteria of literary canons (and thus the search for a more representational literature) is in the testimonial narrative, particularly in the documentary mode of one woman 'listening' to another. (185)

One woman listening to, and then writing the story of another, thus empowering someone unable to otherwise tell her own story, is shown in different ways in the writing of two Mexican women writers, Elena Poniatowska and Cristina Pacheco. Although their writing styles are different, they address common themes. In addition to dealing with the problems of the underprivileged poor in Mexico's Federal District, both writers address the issue of how women in this social strata are marginalized, for their economic status, for being women, and by their own beliefs and acceptance of a patriarchal system that helps keep them in that condition. Each manages to go beyond the marginalization and weakness of these women in order to
uncover their strengths and their value as literary subjects and even as the creators of literature through their participation in testimonial fiction.

In this paper I will discuss ways in which Poniatowska and Pacheco use testimonial fiction to give a voice to poor Mexican women, thus broadening the scope of traditional history by their inclusion. In doing so I will refer to the criteria listed by Beverley and Barnet for identifying testimonio and testimonial fiction, as well as to the works of other critics and writers dealing with these themes. Finally, I will discuss the implications of testimonio and testimonial literature as a feminist genre.
2. Elena Poniatowska and the Creation of Jesusa Palancares

"The voice of the oppressed in Latin America includes literature by women. I believe this so deeply that I'm willing to make it a leitmotif, a ritornello, an ideology" (Poniatowska, "Literature and Women" 81). Elena Poniatowska uses these words to begin an article in which she discusses the place of writers in Latin America like herself who "have chosen to give a voice to those without one" (83). For Poniatowska, this decision to write as a voice for poor Mexican women is seen both as an outgrowth of her own socialist and feminist ideology (Poniatowska "Entrevista" 193) and as a deliberate choice in her own authorial self-creation through writing because of her European education and background and her social privilege (Chevigny 49).

Poniatowska was born in France in 1933, and it was not until she was nine years old that she moved with her mother and sister to Mexico City (Jörgensen "Elena Poniatowska" 472). There she was influenced both by an aristocratic upbringing, which included an American and European Education (Poniatowska "Literature and Woman" 80), and by the Mexican women working in her parents' house who taught her Spanish (Jörgensen "Elena Poniatowska" 472). Poniatowska began her writing career in 1954 as a journalist, and became noted for her interviews (Jörgensen "Elena Poniatowska" 472-73). The same year, she published

Her first novel, *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío*, is a testimonial novel about the life of a poor Mexican woman. Critics view this novel as a bridge between Poniatowska's fiction and her journalism and testimonios in its blending of the journalistic technique of the interview and the creation and recreation of plot and character involved in writing fiction (Jörgensen "Elena Poniatowska" 476). According to Poniatowska, the process of identifying herself with Mexico, and forging a Mexican identity for herself through her writing, began with her involvement with Josefina Bórquez (1900-1987), the woman on whom the character of Jesusa Palancares in *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* is based (Steele 155). Poniatowska interviewed Bórquez every Wednesday from 1963 to 1964 (Steele 155), and these interviews became both the basis for the novel and for Poniatowska's self-created identity as a Mexican woman:

> Mientras ella hablaba surgían en mi mente las imágenes, y todas me producían una gran alegría. Me sentía fuerte de todo lo que no he vivido.
Llegaba a mi casa y les decía: «Saben, algo está naciendo en mí, algo nuevo que antes no existía», pero no contestaron nada. Yo les quería decir: «Tengo cada vez más fuerza, estoy creciendo, ahora sí voy a ser una mujer». Lo que crecía a lo mejor estaba allí desde hace años era el ser mexicana; el hacerme mexicana; sentir que México estaba adentro de mí y que era el mismo que el de Jesús y que con solo abrir la rendija saldría. [. . .] Una noche, antes de que viniera el sueño, después de identificarme largamente con la Jesús y repasar una a una todas sus imágenes, pude decirme en voz baja: Yo sí pertenezco. (Poniatowska "Hasta" 8)

Thus, for Poniatowska, Josefina Bórquez became a truly representational subject for testimonio, representing not only herself but all Mexico, as well as her own newly acknowledged Mexican identity. In spite of her use of the interview, and Bórquez's life being representative of the lives of other poor women in Mexico, Poniatowska chose to tell her story as a testimonial novel, rather than testimonio. This raises many questions as to the nature and extent of Poniatowska's recreation of the life of Josefina Bórquez in the character of Jesús Palancares: In what way is Jesús Palancares Josefina Bórquez, and how do they differ? How much of the story in the novel happened, and how much was invented by Poniatowska? How much of the novel's emphasis on certain events is Poniatowska's, and how much is Bórquez's own?

Through an examination of transcripts of Poniatowska's interviews with Bórquez, Cynthia Steele has begun to answer
these questions, as told in her article "Testimonio y autoridad en Hasta no verte, Jesús mío, de Elena Poniatowska". According to Steele, Poniatowska was both faithful to the essential elements of Bórquez's life story and to her language (157). Poniatowska did, however, have a real authorial presence in the text in her manipulation and recreation of Bórquez's life in the character of Jesusa Palancares, and in her interpretation of it, which she passes along to the reader. In an article discussing Bórquez eleven years after Hasta no verte, Jesús mío was published, Poniatowska describes how she manipulated the woman's story in her creation of the character Jesusa Palancares:

... como no soy antropóloga, la mía puede considerarse una novela testimonial y no un documento antropológico y sociológico. Utilicé las anécdotas, las ideas y muchos de los modismos de Jesusa Palancares pero no podía afirmar que el relato es una transcripción directa de su vida porque ella misma lo rechazaría. Mate a los personajes que me sobraban, elimine cuanta sesión espiritualista pude, elaboré donde me pareció necesario, podé, cosí, remendé, inventé. Al terminar tuve un poco la sensación de haberme quedado en la superficie; no hice visible lo esencial, la naturaleza profunda de la Jesusa, pero ahora con los años pienso que si no lo hice fue porque hallaba lo más vital sin tener una verdadera conciencia de ello... Como sólo pude recurrir a la grabadora cuando ella me lo autorizaba, en la noche de los miércoles de cada semana, reconstruí lo que me había dicho. En su voz oía yo la voz de la nana que me enseñó español, la de todas las criadas que pasaron por mi casa como chiflonazos, sus expresiones, su modo de ver la vida, si es que la veían porque sólo vivían al día y no tenían razón alguna para hacerse ilusiones. Estas y otras voces de mujeres
In this quote Poniatowska stresses both Jesusa Palancares' value as a representational subject, as Barnet said testimonial novels should have, and Jesusa Palancares' difference from Josefina Bórquez. Because Poniatowska used not only Bórquez but also the other poor Mexican women she knew in constructing Palancares' monologue, the character's language becomes representative of not only the colloquialisms, proverbs, and insults typical of Oaxaca and Mexico City, where Bórquez lived, but also of poor women from throughout Mexico (Poniatowska "And Here's" 43-44).

Another example of Poniatowska's manipulation of Bórquez's life to create the character of Jesusa is her invention of the episodes and paragraphs in the text. A significant invention of Poniatowska's is the final paragraph of the book, where Jesusa concludes her monologue addressing herself directly to Poniatowska, and through her, to the reader:

Yo no creo que la gente sea buena, la mera verdad, no. Sólo Jesucristo y no lo conocí. Y mi padre, que nunca supe si me quiso o no. Pero de aquí sobre la tierra, ¿quién quiere usted que sea bueno? Ahora ya no chingue. Váyase. Déjeme dormir. (Poniatowska Hasta 316)

This conclusion, invented by Poniatowska, serves to further link this testimonial novel to testimonio in its address to
the reader. According to Steele, the reader is left with a sense of blame for having listened to Palancares' confession, thus invading her privacy (177). According to Beverley, testimonio "always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability of the reader's world must be brought into question" (23). By inspiring this sense of shame in the reader who has come to identify with Jesusa and to admire her courage in face of insurmountable difficulty, it is a last reminder that the testimonial novel is based on the life of a real person who suffers real social injustice which must be addressed, namely, the struggle for survival of the working poor in Mexico's Federal District. In this manner it adds to Jesusa's value as a representational protagonist without significantly altering her story.

Another of Poniatowska's additions is the episode where Jesusa meets Zapata, which Poniatowska explains by saying that Zapata was the only figure in the Mexican Revolution that Bórquez admired (Lagos-Pope 250). Although this invention of a totally fictitious episode is clearly a mark of Poniatowska's presence in the text, and of how testimonial novels differ from testimonio, the addition of one invented anecdote does not significantly alter the story of Bórquez's life as much as Poniatowska's deletion of as
many spiritual sessions as she could from the novel.

In eliminating the spiritual sessions, Poniatowska changed the focus of the novel from where Bórquez wanted it to where she wanted it, reinterpreting Josefina Bórquez's life in a manner inconsistent with Bórquez's own interpretation. In an interview with Magdalena García Pinto in 1983, Poniatowska recognized that her deletion of spiritualist episodes from the novel caused problems between her and Bórquez, and led Bórquez to reject Hasta no verte, Jesús mío as her life story:

... ella quería que pusiera énfasis en una cosa que a ella le importa mucho, la Obra Espiritual, su casa de Mesmer, Roque Rojas, Luz de Oriente y todo ese tipo de cosas. Entonces se siente defraudada de mí y dice que yo invento personajes y que yo maté gente y que quién era ese, quién era el otro. ("Entrevista" 181-82)

In her article "Testimonio y autoridad en Hasta no verte, Jesús mío" Cynthia Steele discusses this central problem of focus and interpretation and the differing opinions of Poniatowska and Bórquez as to the meaning of her life. According to Steele, Bórquez was interesting to Poniatowska because her independence and combativeness made her different from the stereotypical passive Mexican woman, but Bórquez considered her life interesting to others not for these traits, but for its illustration of religious principles and as an example of how poor people suffer in
Mexico City (156). Steele is not alone in the questions she raises about the nature of the collaboration involved in *testimonio* and testimonial fiction and the ethical problem of interpretation due to the interview method on which the works are based. In her article "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," Katherine Borland discusses the problems that arose between herself and her grandmother when she interpreted her grandmother's story of a day at the racetrack with her father saying that her grandmother was a feminist, a label the other woman rejected. In her conclusion, Borland suggests extending the interview process of oral narrative research to include the interpretation of the narrator of the importance and meaning of her own story (73).

I believe that the similar conflict of interpretations that arose between Poniatowska and Bórquez partially explains what appears to be a radical shift from Palancares' childhood and youth to her old age, as Poniatowska stressed Jesusa's early vitality and deleted the spiritual episodes that Bórquez wanted to stress.

After her mother's death, Jesusa was an active tomboy, chasing off all women who attempted to take her mother's place. In her youth she was a strong, resourceful, independent woman, refusing to allow her husband to abuse
her, and enjoying a variety of occupations and adventures after his death. In contrast to this vitality, in her old age, alone and in ill health, she looks forward to death. Worst of all Jesusa denounces her earlier combativeness and independence as sins she must rid herself of according to the spiritualist sect she has joined and abandoned, and the spiritualist beliefs she maintains. This negative outlook is especially shown in the concluding paragraphs of Hasta no verte, Jesús mío, where Palancares discusses her wish to die.

Another reason for the difference between the young and the old Jesusa is given by Beth Jörgensen, in her article "Perspectivas femeninas en Hasta no verte, Jesús mío y La 'Flor de Lis'". According to Jörgensen, Jesusa's criticism of herself as a younger woman also shows a certain ambivalence within Jesusa herself which is due to her oppression, shown by her calling herself bad because she did not allow her husband to beat her to death:

Al juzgarse 'terrible' y 'mala' por cuestionar la autoridad del esposo, la narradora revela su ambivalencia hacia su propia sobrevivencia en tanto significa un desafío abierto al comportamiento femenino convencional. Tanto la pasividad, ya criticada, como la autodefensa activa son respuestas problemáticas a la situación vital de Jesusa. Este no es un caso único, sino que a lo largo de la novela la narradora critica la rebeldía, agresividad y cólera de su 'yo' más joven a la vez que condena el machismo y desprecia a cualquier mujer que 'se deje' del hombre. La discordia entre la Jesusa que habla y la Jesusa que ve es una sintoma de la imposibilidad de lograr una reconciliación definitiva consigo misma.
en su lucha individual y generalmente solitaria contra la opresión. (116)

Jesusa's participation in the *Obra Espiritual* may have led her to reinterpret her past actions in light of her spiritualist beliefs, now judging what was necessary for her physical survival as harmful to her salvation. This is seen in the first chapter of the text which relates a series of visions Jesusa has experienced, in which she describes past lives that make up for the misery of her present life in their grandeur, adventure, and exotic nature.

Jesusa's second vision, that of her first life, is an example of her self-recreation through her visions in accordance with the societal view she outwardly rejects, that of the passive, good woman. Jesusa sees herself as first fleeing from and then killed by her husband, whose name is Light of the East, and who is also one of Jesusa's three spiritual protectors in her current existence, according to the *Obra Espiritual* (*Hasta* 10). In this manner she rewrites the episode in her current life she feels guilty for, that of preventing her husband Pedro from beating her to death by threatening him with a revolver. Although Jesusa tells how her life with Pedro improved after she stood up to him, and gives biblical support for her actions, she still feels guilty for not conforming to her
society's model of the good, passive woman at the same time that she condemns women who allow themselves to be abused:

Pedro se volvió más bueno desde que yo lo balacé. Pero entonces yo fui la que me empeñé. De por sí, yo desde chica fui mala, así nací, terrible, pero Pedro no me daba oportunidad. La bendita revolución me ayudó a desenvolverse. Cuando Pedro me colmó el plato ya me dije claramente: "Me defiendo o que me mate de una vez." Si yo no fuera mala me hubiera dejado de Pedro hasta que me matara. Pero hubo un momento en que seguro Dios me dijo: "Defiéndete." Porque Dios dice: "Ayúdate y yo te ayudaré." Y yo oí que me dijo: "Defiéndete, ya es suficiente con lo que has recibido. Ahora empieza tú a repartir." Y saqué la pistola. Después dije que no me dejaría y cumplí la palabra. Tan no me deje, que aquí estoy. Pero cuanto sufrí mientras me estuve dejando! Yo creo que en el mismo infierno ha de haber un lugar para todas las dejadas. Puros tizones en el fundillol! (Poniatowska Hasta 101)

This spiritualist reinterpretation of her life has led Jesusa to other ambivalences that also reveal contradictions between her defiance of traditional women's roles and her internalization and acceptance of these roles as models for good behavior. Jesusa describes herself in her current life as returning to earth in her third incarnation because of sins committed in her past lives. In her most recent past life, she sees herself as a queen dressed in a white robe in the long mirrors of a beauty salon. She is accompanied by two servants, Colombiana and Pierrot, and she is wearing a long white bridal gown. Under its train she glimpses her long, yellow and black tiger's tail (Hasta 9). Although
Jesusa does not stretch her interpretation of her vision beyond her acceptance of the Obra Espiritual priestess' and her comment that she is now poor because she was then rich, another interpretation of it is suggested by Monique J. Lemaître, in her article "Jesusa Palancares y la dialéctica de la emancipación feminina." According to Lemaître:

In this way Lemaître reveals how Jesusa, openly scornful of rich privileged women like Poniatowska for their uselessness (Poniatowska "And Here's" 6), really identifies with them and with their privileges (conventional beauty, elegant clothing, marriage, servants). Not able to experience these in her everyday existence, Jesusa uses her rich fantasy life to enjoy them. This raises the question as to how Bórquez saw her relationship with Poniatowska, and if she saw her relation with the author as in some way granting her this privileged status, much in the same way Poniatowska saw her relationship with Bórquez as granting her an ethnic Mexican
identity. Whether this is true or not, it is clear that Jesusa did not see her real self as corresponding to her outer poverty, but rather to this rich inner self, a former queen. This is shown in Jesusa's disappointment at her photograph, related by Poniatowska in "And Here's to You, Jesusa":

Her reactions always unsettled me. Right in front of me she ripped into a thousand pieces some photos that Hector García had taken of us one afternoon: "This shows a lack of respect! This is filth! What I wanted was one like this!" She did not like to see herself with an apron, standing in the middle of the entrance to her building. "I thought it was going to come out like this!" And she pointed to her large sepia portrait hanging in a wooden frame. "That's a Marcel wave, with three or five waves, according to the size." (The size of what? Her head?) (44)

As to the tiger's tail representing the Indian element in Mexico and Jesusa's rejection of her Indian heritage, this too is another case of ambivalence on the part of Jesusa. In support of Lemaître's argument, one has only to read Jesusa's description of her abusive, macho brother Efrén Palancares, "Era muy prieto, muy borracho y muy perdido" (Hasta 22), in which she links the dark color of his skin to his moral character. On the other hand, Jesusa speaks highly of her mother, a woman of Indian descent from Tehuantepec, saying "Mi mamá no me regañó ni me pegó nunca. Era morena igual que mí, chaparrita, gorda y cuando se murió nunca volví a jugar" (Hasta 20). She also speaks well of
her stepmother Evarista, another strong tehuana, and of Evarista's mother, Fortunata, a Zapotec Indian who sent her daughter to school, unlike Jesusa's own father, who refused to send her (Hasta 52). Jesusa shares in her ladina-dominated culture's contempt for Indians while at the same time recognizing the good qualities of individual Indians in much the same manner that she condemns her actions of self-preservation that contradicted her society's view of what a good woman is supposed to be while at the same time continuing to act to preserve her life and to defend herself.

According to John Bruce-Novoa, in his article "Subverting the Dominant Text: Elena Poniatowska's Querido Diego", this internal ambivalence, in which a character's actions and life work to undermine the status quo that causes his or her oppression, while the character's own words and opinions support it, is inherent to testimonio:

Even when the testimony comes directly from the oppressed, the language and forms through which they express themselves often derive from the dominant sector. More than a problem of surface language, this situation reflects an often deep-seated interiorization of the dominant, repressive ideology on the part of the oppressed. (116)

Although in her monologue Jesusa appears to accept and to value the status quo under which she barely survives, her actions continue to subvert it through her exuberance for
life and her continued survival. According to Poniatowska, Jesusa is an oppressed woman who does not fit the stereotype of oppressed women in Mexico because of her extraordinary strength, her ability to save herself, and her spiritualism (Poniatowska "Testimonios" 158-59).

It is Palancares' spiritualism that most distinguishes her from the traditional catholic Mexican woman, and from which she draws her strength. It is a strength based not on an external hierarchy, such as that of traditional Catholicism, but on Jesusa’s own visions which give her direction, comfort and her concept of herself. In a vision from God, Jesusa is told to share her spiritual learning with others (Hasta 300), but feels unworthy because she is poor (301). Finally her doubts are confirmed by her reception by the other priestesses, who push her farther and farther back during their religious service to make room for more important leaders, until Jesusa has no place to sit, and leaves angrily (302). This is her break with the organized Obra Espiritual, which she ultimately denounces as too materialistic (303), although she retains her belief and her visions continue to give her strength.

In "Elena Poniatowska's Hasta no verte, Jesús mío [Until I See You, Dear Jesus]," Charles M. Tatum interprets Jesusa's involvement with the Obra Espiritual in another
way, as a betrayal of her "responsibility as a non-passive, non-submissive Mexican female" (57). According to Tatum:

Having surrendered her freedom and self-assertiveness -- this surrender is viewed as desirable by Jesusa herself -- she thereby reverts to the passive, submissive role of the traditional Mexican woman. *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* is, then, the tale of failure, the autobiography of the dismal fate of a woman whose life contained the potential for both spiritual and social liberation. (58)

While this view is supported by the ambivalence expressed by Jesusa in her self-condemnation for threatening Pedro with the gun, and for her self-image as revealed in her visions, which is thoroughly consistent with the values represented by traditional middle-class Mexican women; it ignores the subversive and transforming nature of Jesusa's actions. When Jesusa discovered that the *Obra Espiritual* was above all interested in material gain, and that its priestesses tried to deny her right to also heal the sick and share her visions because of her poverty, she broke with the sect. I see this action as a continuation of the fighting spirit and individualism so characteristic of her youth. In addition, while Tatum sees Jesusa's visions as self-deception, I believe that they are powerful ways for Jesusa to exert control over her life by rewriting and reinterpreting it, providing herself a rich spiritual existence in exchange for her impoverished material one. In recreating the life of
Josefina Bórquez in the character of Jesusa Palancares, 
Elena Poniatowska has succeeded in creating a strong, 
independent, vital Mexican woman, not only as she wished to, 
by placing Palancares within Mexican literature and history 
in stressing the qualities that make her different from the 
traditional Mexican woman (Poniatowska "And Here's" 44), but 
also in the parts of her life that Poniatowska attempted to 
minimize in the novel: Bórquez's involvement in 
spiritualist religion. Although Hasta no verte, Jesús mío 
is characterized in this manner by the interplay of two 
perspectives, that of Bórquez and that of Poniatowska, these 
perspectives enhance rather than detract from each other. 
This is seen in Jesusa's judgement: "Si la mayoría de la 
gente llegara a reconocer el camino limpio de Dios no habría 
hombres abusones ni mujeres que se dejan" (Hasta 12), 
which becomes a perfect counterpart to Poniatowska's, as 
both women work to change the stereotypical roles of the 
passive woman who is a victim to her abusive, macho husband, 
lover or father.
3. Cristina Pacheco and the Journalist’s Role in Testimonio

Through her books and journalism, she staked out an unequivocal stance vis-à-vis literature and society: society's oppressed are doubly victimized when their existence goes unheard, so literature must break their silence and society's indifference (Bruce-Novoa 509).

Although he wrote these words about Elena Poniatowska, John Bruce-Novoa's description in his article, "Elena Poniatowska: The Feminist Origins of Commitment" also fits the work of another Mexican journalist and writer of testimonial literature, Cristina Pacheco. According to María Elena de Valdés, in her article "Feminist Testimonial Literature: Cristina Pacheco, Witness to Women," Poniatowska and Pacheco are among the leading writers of feminist testimonial literature in Mexico (161). A common theme in their writing is the oppression of poor working women in Mexico City. As discussed, Poniatowska revealed this oppression in Hasta no verte, Jesús mío, her novela testimonial about the life of Josefina Bórquez as recreated in the character of Jesusa Palancares. Pacheco has told the lives of women similar to Palancares in her weekly short stories in Mexico City newspapers (161). These have been gathered in five collections: Para vivir aquí (1983), Cuarto de azotea (1983), Sopita de fideo (1985), Zona de desastre (1986) and La última noche del "Tigre" (1987) (162). Pacheco's stories are characterized by their brevity.
and their immediacy. Above all, they are based on real people and events, a characteristic Beverley mentions in defining *testimonio* (16). In her work on Pacheco, it is this characteristic that Valdés calls essential to testimonial fiction (160).

According to Beverley:

... one common formal variation on the classic first-person singular *testimonio* is the polyphonic *testimonio* made up of accounts of different participants in the same event. (16)

This is the form which characterizes both Elena Poniatowska's *testimonio* *La noche de Tlatelolco*, her account of the student demonstrations and massacre of student dissidents in the summer of 1968, and Cristina Pacheco's *Zona de desastre*. *Zona de desastre* is a collection of Pacheco's articles, interviews and stories about the Mexico City earthquake of July 19, 1985, first written and published in newspapers during its aftermath. Like the work of Poniatowska, they are filled with the language, faith, and strength of poor Mexican women not unlike Jesusa Palancares. Most notably, they tell the story of the seamstresses working in sweatshop conditions at a miserable wage whose exploitation came to light in the aftermath of the earthquake. This is seen on the cover of the book itself, which shows a photograph of dolls for sale to benefit a newly-formed union the seamstresses have created.
to sue for better working conditions. Pacheco, through
telling their stories, can be seen as helping them in their struggle. In this manner, Zona de desastre complies with
Beverley's definition of testimonio by uniting the
privileged Pacheco with her underprivileged subjects,
without a loss of her own identity (19). This too can be
compared to the work of Poniatowska, who, according to
Chevigny:

. . . broke through the noise of disordered reminiscence (another kind of silence), and saw the strength hidden in weakness. Human gain buried in human loss, the diamond in the coal, these are the strengths granted women that women artists are especially gifted in releasing. (56)

In "Los hilos de la vida: Las costureras", and "La
prisionera", two selections from Zona de desastre, Pacheco
also shows her ability to find human gain buried in human loss, revealing how this destructive event could also be a motivating force for change.

The first of these two selections begins with Pacheco identifying herself with her readers, using nosotros as she relates their collective failure to look beyond their own fear and indifference to the problems of others that characterized their relations before the earthquake (41). Pacheco continues her denunciation, contrasting advertising slogans for clothing with the wretched existence of the women who produce it:
She then reaffirms her solidarity with the seamstresses and asserts her positive interpretation of their actions as making the tragedy of the earthquake less senseless (42). Finally, Pacheco begins the bulk of her narration, the text of an interview between herself and María de la Luz, a seamstress that Pacheco chose as being truly representative of the members of the seamstresses' labor union (42). Unlike Hasta no verte, Jesús mío, both Pacheco's questions and María de la Luz's answers are reproduced, producing a dialogue between the two women. This interplay between the two produces yet another characteristic of testimonio, which Beverley calls "a literary simulacrum of oral narrative" (15). Like Poniatowska's novel, the interview chronicles María de la Luz's life to date, another characteristic of testimonio. María de la Luz is also characteristic of the narrators of testimonio and testimonial fiction in her ability to destroy myths through her testimony, much as Jesusa Palancares was able to destroy myths of the passive Mexican woman and the Mexican Revolution (Poniatowska "Literature" 84). This is the myth of marriage as domestic
bliss without which no woman is happy. María de la Luz describes her husband's egotism, economic neglect and eventual abandonment of her and their children, summing up her marriage as hell (84-85). Her life story is clearly divided into two parts: Her life before the earthquake, characterized by loneliness, suffering and victimization by others; and her life after, characterized by hope for the future through her political activism in the union. This hopeful message is also one characterized by what seems to be a blind faith, not in religion, but in the power for collective social change to end suffering, a faith typical of socialist ideology. Does Pacheco, by responding to the earthquake in this manner, present an overly-uplifting, simplified version of the tragic events in Mexico in 1985? Although the reader who only read this story might think so, this is not the case. By reading "Los hilos de la vida: Las costureras" in conjunction with other stories in Zona de desastre, one is able to see that Pacheco presents a multitude of voices in the book whose interpretations both conflict with and enhance one another. Stories with a less hopeful description of the seamstresses and their possibilities for the future include "Tela de araña" and "El salario del miedo."
"Tela de araña" is the story of another seamstress, Catalina, whose memories of the earthquake and deaths of her companions are interspersed by the words of her mother who tries to hurry her along to work. In reflecting on her companions' death, Catalina both realizes that it could have been hers as well, and fears she too may die in returning to work. Her mother, rather than being a comforting presence, is instead seen as the reason for her being in this situation.

"Tela de araña" is in this manner a jarring contrast to the earlier hope and solidarity among women seen in "Los hilos de la vida: Las costureras". This contrast begins with the title of the piece. While "Los hilos" evokes largely positive images of life, these same threads which symbolized the connection as well as the work of the women are transformed into the threads of a spider's web woven by Catalina's mother in the story's concluding paragraph:

Hoy, como cuando era niña, como siempre, Catalina siente que su madre pone en torno a su cuello un hilito invisible; el de la vida diaria que es para ella también el de la muerte. (81)

Another female figure in the story, that of Catalina's schoolteacher, adds her words to the story in Catalina's memory. Catalina relates how her teacher reprimanded her for her poor performance in class by reminding her of her mother's sacrifice to no avail:
"No es justo que vengas a perder el tiempo mientras que tu madre está allá, quebrándose la espalda, sobre la máquina de coser. ¿Y sabes para qué lo hace? Para que cuando seas grande no batales tanto, para que consigas un trabajo mejor."

No lo encontró. El sacrificio de su madre fue inútil. En quinto año dejó los estudios. "Esta niña no sirve para la escuela. Mejor que pongala a trabajar, que se ocupe en algo porque si nada más la deja flojeando allí en la casa al rato hasta le va a salir con que dio su mal paso. . ." (80-81)

These words are the inverse of those used by María de la Luz in "Los hilos" to justify her hard work in reasoning that it will enable her children to not have to work as hard. (49). This story contrasts the point of view of a daughter who feels trapped in her position, caring for her aging mother, with the more hopeful one of a woman working to help her children. Also important in this paragraph is its revelation of the role of the school system that has failed to educate Catalina in sanctioning her continued oppression by justifying her decision to leave school for work at such a young age. Catalina recognizes this, describing her teacher's words as "una trampa con que la mantenía inmóvil, torturada, en su sitio" (81).

Another contrast between "Los hilos" and "Tela de araña" is the latter's emphasis on the dead seamstresses whose memory haunts Catalina. She remembers them as happy, live women, in contrast to her mother, who remembers their
disfigured bodies after the earthquake (79). This only increases her loneliness:

Durante la media hora que les dan para comer, Catalina se acomoda, como antes, en los escalones de la puerta. Allí siente más vivo el recuerdo de sus compañeras. Los lugares que ocupaban Zoila, Margarita, Elena, Luisa, Carmen, Reynalda, están vacíos. El miserable pan de Catalina se vuelve amargo con la ausencia. (80)

This contrasts with "Los hilos" is several ways. The life of María de la luz was that of a woman chosen by Pacheco as representative of all of the seamstresses, thus serving to condense many lives into the story of one life which stands for all. Here, by contrast, Pacheco's listing each of the dead women by name serves to stress the importance of remembering each individual life. In "Re-membering the Dead: Latin American Women's 'Testimonial' Discourse", Nancy Saporta Sternbach discusses how the testimonios of Claribel Alegría and Hebe de Bonafini:

...serve as the repositories of memory, thereby requiring survivors of the dead to recreate those lives posthumously. In so doing, history is enacted and politically evaluated in order to create a consciousness of what has been silenced, or what could be forgotten -- the dead. (93)

"Tela de araña" can be seen as performing much the same function, as can "Los hilos". However, while the protagonist in "Tela de araña" remembers her companions, she neglects to take the step of reevaluating their lives in a political context that so characterizes María de la luz's
story. According to Pacheco, the political consciousness of the surviving seamstresses makes the other women's deaths less futile, because:

En cada costurera que se afila a la lucha, en cada trabajadora que protesta ante la injusticia, se multiplican y agigantan las voces de aquel grupo de mujeres que, desde el sótano de un edificio derrumbado, estuvieron pidiendo auxilio hasta la hora de su muerte. (42)

Although "Los hilos" and "Tela de araña", do contrast strongly with each other, this contrast works to reinforce Pacheco's effort to show the hope for a positive change in the lives of these women rather than to diminish it. An important comparison between the two stories can also be made. In the concluding paragraph of "Los hilos", María de la Luz compares the seamstresses to machinery, saying they are worth less than the machinery (49). This belief is illustrated by an incident in Catalina's story, where the factory owner only unearthed the bodies of the dead women after first rescuing all the materials and machinery (80).

Another story which both contrasts with and supports María de la Luz's story in "Los hilos" is the one which appears directly after it in Zona de desastre, called "El salario del miedo". It tells the story of another seamstress, Leonor, who does not join the new union. Instead she continues to work, the only seamstress in an abandoned factory, with the hope of supporting her mother
and children. Pacheco uses the story to contrast and support that of María de la Luz in its opening paragraph, where Leonor's aloneness contrasts with the solidarity of the protesting seamstresses. This contrast continues as the reader learns of Leonor's fear of death as reported by Pacheco: "La sacude un escalofrío al pensar que todos los edificios son tumbas llenas de cuerpos descompuestos, mutilados, irreconocibles" (51). María de la Luz was engaged in a process of rebirth, described by Pacheco as the voices of the dead adding themselves to the demands of the living for better conditions (42). Catalina, though her life lacked this transformation, remembered the importance of the lives of each of her dead companions. In contrast, Leonor's life is characterized by the inverse process of joining the dead rather than remembering them, as she fears becoming trapped in an aftershock in the crumbling building in which she works. Rather than a participant in testifying to the importance of the lives of others as were María de la Luz and Catalina, she asks that others remember her own:

Leonor siente que el piso vuelve a moverse. No se aparta de su sitio. Sólo mira el foco: está inmóvil. Mientras lo observa promete que esta tarde le pedirá a su hija mayor, que va en sexto de primaria, que le escriba una tarjeta grande con su nombre completo, su dirección y el teléfono de la tienda desde donde la llaman. "Por si me muero aquí, que sepan que era yo." (53)
Although Leonor's story contrasts with that of María de la Luz, it can also be compared to it in Pacheco's style and technique. Both María de la Luz and Leonor tell their own life stories in their own words, a characteristic of testimonio and testimonial fiction. Another effective technique Pacheco uses in both is the contrast between the clothing produced by these exploited women and their own lives. As already discussed, this is produced in "Los hilos" by the explicit contrast by Pacheco of advertising slogans for the clothing with the lives of the women who produce it. In "El salario del miedo", this is more subtle, occurring in Leonor's own conclusion of the list of the types of clothing she has made with wedding dresses, although she never had one (53). In this manner, Pacheco continually reminds the reader that even the clothing he or she wears and takes for granted is the result of the exploitation of another human being who will never share in that privilege. Although the stories of these three women contrast with one another, they also support the conclusion of Pacheco that the unionization of the seamstresses is an empowering act that makes the deaths of so many less futile because the earthquake's revelation of their exploitation made change possible for the survivors. For the privileged reader, the stories provide a means for both remembering and
rediscovering what was lost in the lives of these women and for revaluing what remains.

Pacheco develops the same theme of gain revealed in loss in "La prisionera", the story of a young Indian girl from Oaxaca sent to live with her mother's former employer in Mexico City in order to go to school. When the earthquake happened, Jesusa was revealed, chained to post as she had been every night for the last three years, the only survivor of the destruction of the house.

Pacheco begins the story with the description of the destroyed yellow house, and comments of casual passers-by on the tragedy the earthquake revealed. She continues by reporting an unnamed person's judgement of these events as the work of God. By not naming the source of the comment, it comes to represent the collective judgement of all who learned of Jesusa's captivity. At the same time she condemns Jesusa's former neighbors for their failure to acknowledge the girl's suffering before:

Hoy, cuando se sabe el secreto que sus paredes guardaban, su destrucción es vista como prueba de que "hay un Dios en el cielo. El no podía permitir que una cosa tan horrible como esta siguiera pasando aquí, sin que nadie se diera cuenta."

El razonamiento es aceptado por los vecinos de la casa amarilla, que así sepultan entre todos la verdad: muchas veces oyeron los gritos de Jesusa, sus lamentos; notaron su ausencia de la calle donde hace tres años apareció por vez primera en compañía de Ana Luisa. (97-98)
This description of the neighbors burying the truth shows their actions to be the opposite of those of Pacheco, who in her work is concerned with uncovering and reporting the truth about the earthquake victims.

Pacheco's use of contrast, seen earlier in "Los hilos" is also seen in "La prisionera", as Pacheco contrasts the outward appearance of love between Ana Luisa and Jesusa with the torments suffered in secret, linking the two through color:

Si alguien se dirigía a ella, antes de contestar buscaba la autorización en los ojos de Ana Luisa, llenos de amor a la vista del mundo, implacables y fieros en la soledad de su casa amarilla: amarilla como la flama con que daña la carne de Jesusa, que pide misericordia en su idioma; amarilla como el lazo con que marca su espalda, ya doblegada por el trabajo excesivo; amarilla como la infección que se incuba en las heridas de la cautiva; amarilla como la fiebre, como el vómito, como la flor que Jesusa mira y codicia en su prisión. (98)

Central to this paragraph and to the story itself is the issue of language. Jesusa comes from Oaxaca with the goal of entering school and learning to speak Spanish. Not speaking Spanish, Jesusa is powerless to tell her story to those who could help her. Unrecognizable to their ears, her tormented cries are easily interpreted as something other than human by the neighbors who hear her. Finally, when she is rescued, Pacheco reports that it is the people's questions that upset rather than reassure the child.
The theme of language in "La prisionera" is similar to the plight of the Quiché-speaking Indians in Guatemala described by Rigoberta Menchú. Unable to speak Spanish, they are thus unable to fight against their Spanish-speaking oppressors, for although Indians outnumber Spanish-speakers in Guatemala, it is the Spanish or ladina culture which is dominant. According to the anthropologist who compiled Menchú's testimonio, "Rigoberta learned the language of her oppressors in order to use it against them" (Burgos-Debray xii). Like the child Jesusa, Rigoberta before spoke only the language of her people, and was thus unable to communicate their oppression to the world. Another work whose central theme is the importance of language in society is Richard Rodriguez's autobiography Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez, which Beverley calls a sort of antitestimonio because it justifies the stability of the reader's world as much as testimonio questions it, being a sort of bildungsroman for the achievement of middle-class status through the acquisition of the language of the dominant culture (Beverley 17). In this manner, Rodriguez can be seen as learning the language of his oppressors in order to join, rather than to oppose them. This acquisition of middle class status is what the people trying to comfort Jesusa in "La prisionera" appear to be wishing for the
child. Pacheco concludes with their comments:

Verás que pronto te alivias y entonces podrás jugar con otros niños. Luego a lo mejor te mandan a tu pueblo. Quién quite y estudies para maestra, así, cuando seas grande, podrás enseñar a los niños el español que aprendiste aquí. . . (99)

Naively, the people ignore the girl's natural association of Spanish with her tormentors in their unquestioning acceptance of the dominant culture of which they are part. Pacheco is not so naive. "La prisionera", through the use of irony in its concluding paragraph, uncovers not only the brutal treatment suffered by one child but that of all the other Indians she represents. In this manner "La prisionera" is not a simple story of justice served through and in spite of misery, but rather an account of larger social problems that still exist after the rescue of the tortured nine-year-old girl. In much the same way, "Los hilos", "El salario del miedo" and "Tela de araña" expose the social problems that still exist for the seamstresses after the spectacular event of the earthquake exposed their conditions to the world. Read together, the stories both reaffirm the lives of the dead and expose the opportunities for hope and renewal arising from destruction. Like Poniatowska's portrayal of the strengths and fighting spirit of Jesusa Palancares, Pacheco's stories in Zona de desastre
reveal the strengths of the victims of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake.
4. Feminism and Socialism in Testimonial Fiction

As feminists and socialists, Poniatowska and Pacheco seek to revalue the historical place of poor women through an example of the strengths present in their daily lives and in their dealings with tragedy. Details given in their writing are personal, intimate ones. As readers learn of the women's struggles and their extreme poverty, they begin to look at ordinary things in a new light, much as people saw Mexico in a new way the day after the earthquake. Above all, these are personal stories politicized, revealing the nature and details of the women's oppression. According to Beverley, "Testimonio . . . is an instance of the New Left and feminist slogan that 'the personal is the political'" (15). This idea is developed further in the work of Saporta Sternbach, who writes:

The same condition of marginality of women and the oppressed in Latin America which gave so much impetus to the testimonial genre was also instrumental in feminist theory in retrieving, reconstructing, and recovering women's history. Even the characteristic traits of the two sound familiar: both include theory based on and grounded in the reality of a people who are breaking silences; both include theory for those who envision a future distinct from their past of oppression; both use discourse which gives voice to many others in their same situation; and both influence and are influenced by people who, with their new consciousness as a political subject, make evident the relationship between the personal and the political in an historic moment when the subject sees herself/themselves as an integral part of the collective process. (92)
In analyzing the stories in *Zona de desastre*, feminism as described above seems to be a clear influence. Pacheco writes stories of women unable to write themselves, a clear example of breaking silences; both Jesusa in "La prisionera" and the seamstresses in "Los hilos" have hope for a future free from the oppression of their past; and the seamstresses in *Zona de desastre* clearly see themselves as part of a collective process of banding together to achieve better working conditions. *Hasta no verte, Jesús mío* is more problematic. Palancares' story is that of a woman unable to write herself, thus breaking silence; through reincarnation, Palancares has some hope for a future free from oppression, but no such hope presents itself in this life; finally, although Poniatowska sees herself as involved in a collective social struggle to improve the quality of life for women through her writing, Palancares appears to feel no such solidarity. As discussed, although Palancares is feminist in her actions, her ideology remains that of the patriarchal culture which oppresses her. Although Jesusa can be interpreted in a positive light by feminists as a strong, independent woman, she is not herself a feminist. In spite of this, through telling the stories of women like Jesusa Palancares and María de la Luz, Cristina Pacheco and Elena Poniatowska work to further their feminist and
socialist ideologies by giving voice to the voiceless and finding the strength buried in their weakness.
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