evidence that opera shaped the Mexican imagination, for example, by influencing other art forms.[6]

The preference for foreign styles of music, dance, architecture, dress, and so on was therefore at odds with the interest that the elite also showed in an emerging indigenous literature. Mexican novelists such as Ignacio Altamirano increasingly set their stories locally, with recognizable personages often drawn from the lower classes. National writers like Victoriano Salado Alvarez turned to the Mexican past to create "episodios nacionales mexicanos" (Mexican national tales). Historians set to work to retrieve Mexico's Indian history and to analyze events of the independence war and ensuing developments. Why, then, was the "performance" of opera appropriate for stating international membership, while the practice of literature was somehow suitable for expressing nationalism? Why did Mexicans choose public art to accomplish one political goal and private art to accomplish another? Discussion of the communication value of the various art forms, of the necessity of reaching all members of a multilingual society, is to be found in Mexican newspapers from the last years of colonial rule. I find it suggestive that, in the postcolonial period, national leaders imported an art form that was so exclusive. It is possible that opera's orientalist stories of gender and racial encounter hinted at Mexico's internal divisions yet also permitted fanciful escapes from the excruciating problems Indians posed. Opera's very foreignness, I believe, reproduced the denial of the Indian self that Mexican governmental policies, which attempted to eliminate Indians and their culture, increasingly pursued in the nineteenth century.

[6] I do not know how opera may have affected Mexican music.

Reading Loose Women Reading

Debra A. Castillo

Who reads novels in Latin America these days? In view of the post-boom disillusion with the role of the writer in society, what is the use value of fiction? According to Mexican sociocritic Sara Sefchovich (her extensive body of work includes important critical studies like *México: País de ideas, país de novelas* [Mexico: Country of ideas, country of novels (1987)] and the two-volume anthology *Mujeres en espejo* [Women mirrored (1983–85)], as well as two best-selling novels: *Demasiado amor* [Too much love (1990)] and *La señora de los sueños* [The lady who dreamed (1993)]), her success and that of other women writers like Angeles Mastretta and Laura Esquivel point to a very clear answer to the first question: women, especially leisured middle-class women, read, and they overwhelmingly read works by other middle-class women in which women have positive protagonistic roles (pers. com., June 1994). Even more interestingly, works like hers and those of her colleagues who make it to Mexican best-sellerdom tend to highlight women who freely express their sexuality and are not castigated for their adventurous love lives. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this interest in fictional loose women has spilled over into a parallel publishing boomlet in the *testimonios* of actual loose women. While the phenomenon has been noted with increasing frequency in critical discussions of contemporary Mexican literature, its implications have remained largely unexplored. What is needed, and is only intermittently beginning to make its appearance in studies like those of Jean Franco, Doris Sommer, and Sefchovich herself, is a theory of the reading woman.

My purpose in this essay is to make a modest contribution to this

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theory by exploring a specific instance of the use of both fictional texts and critical studies about loose women by other loose women and to ask what these marginalized women find of value in such works and what use we academic readers make of them.[1] One hint comes to me from recent Europeanist studies. In *Women for Hire* Alain Corbin writes that the nineteenth-century ethnographic study of Parisian prostitutes by Alexandre Parent-Duchatelet was so influential that it not only affected later studies of prostitution in France and other countries but also, indirectly, became a force shaping women's lives: "Parent-Duchatelet's portrait of the prostitute was repeated so often in the literature on prostitution and inspired so many novelists that, in addition to distorting the vision of later researchers . . . it determined to some extent the behavior of the prostitutes themselves."[2] What I find fascinating is Corbin's contention that a specific academic exercise had a major effect on fictional practice and that fictional versions of this produced knowledge in turn influenced certain social practices (those of real prostitutes), which were then reencoded in Corbin's own anthropological construct of them.

A similar process of life influencing fiction influencing life underlies Xorge del Campo's "sociological" study of prostitution in Mexico: "Fenómeno curioso en las prostitutas: son numerosas las que aman la lectura. ¿Pero qué leen? Fotonovelas, revistillas románticas, por supuesto, en las cuales espigan ideas y lugares comunes que luego expanden a su contorno" [There is a curious phenomenon among prostitutes; many of them love reading. But what do they read? Comic

[1] This essay is part of a book in progress on loose women in modern Mexican fiction. I thank Doris Sommer for the invitation to participate in this special issue and would like to acknowledge as well Doris's enormous contribution in shaping the terms of this discussion.

[2] Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 7.

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books, romance magazines, of course, in which they spot the ideas and commonplaces that they later expand to their surroundings.][3] In both del Campo and Corbin, the construction of an informative, even scientific, study of loose women is hinged upon and tightly implicated in the relation between lives and fictions. In each study, the loose women are seen not only as fictionalizers but as fictional subjects and as fictional objects. The women tell fictions that writers turn into novels; the women read the novels and turn the fictions back into their daily lives and their work as part of a storied experience tailored to the tastes of the client. Consequently, the sociologist can never be sure if the stories he hears are lived or read or imagined, since the essence of the life is already an artifice. Furthermore, as Corbin recognizes, the knowledge structures that guide the researcher are also artificial; they too are stories that shape the researcher's vision.

A parallel, equally convoluted process occurs on another level with Federico Gamboa's best-selling turn-of-the-century novel *Santa*, about the rise and fall of a Mexican prostitute. Like the nineteenth-century French and English narratives it superficially resembles, Gamboa's novel turns contemporary sociological and anthropological truisms about fallen women into an aesthetic product, self-identified as artifice and served up as such to an eager reading public. Despite its contrived frame, however, the novel, taken as a faithful biography, spawns a veritable cult of fans, who organize trips to the heroine's "birthplace" and "tomb." Santa, like the Velveteen Rabbit, like the characters in "fotonovelas" and "revistillas románticas," becomes real and, theoretically, would have real effects on a real society. While I would not attempt to follow Corbin's or del Campo's lead and extend conclusions about the influence of Santa and her fictional and cinematic heirs on the *behavior* of other women or on the social formations instantiated by such fictions—the effort would take me far beyond the scope of this study—I would argue that to some extent Gamboa's novel draws the perimeters for later Mexican intellectual discussions of loose women by critics, chroniclers, and novelists like José Joaquín Blanco, del Campo, Margo Glantz, Sergio González Rodríguez, Carlos Monsiváis,

[3] Del Campo, *La prostitución en México (dossier)* (Mexico City: Editores Asociados, 1974), 124. My translations.

Cristina Pacheco, Marta Lamas, Sefchovich, and Luis Zapata. The trouble with their books, however, is that their ostensible subjects do not usually have the opportunity to read them, much less to respond to the depiction of their lives with their own versions.

Nevertheless, I argue that such works establish the tradition within which or against which later memoirs and testimonials by women are published, including works like the one I use as an example here, Antonia Mora's *Del oficio* [The life]. Mora's story of her life as a ghetto-bred second-generation prostitute and thief, as framed by novelist María Luisa Mendoza's prologue, becomes a tale of sin and redemption. The work enters the marketplace as an artifact: like *Santa*, it offers a construction both moral and artificial, a tissue of pregnant and titillating silences that should or should not be broken, an allegory for an unrecognized or ignored national identity. The book presents itself, or is framed as, terribly serious, highly entertaining, and slightly naughty. The story is familiar yet exotic: the Cinderella myth of the poor girl redeemed by the love of an honest man. The woman whose body confirms the reality of the tale is simultaneously a liar, an able storyteller, a deficient fiction writer, and an honest chronicler. Mendoza reminds her readers and herself of the many options in her description of Mora's relationship to the text, but she carefully does not adjudicate among them. At the same time, Mendoza tacitly acknowledges the reader's expectations and the tradition within which Mora's story will be read:

> Antonia me trae su novela, su cuento, su escrito, su vida pues, convicta y confesa, sin clasificación literaria porque no es un estudio sociológico ni la exaltación del erotismo ni menos de la pornografía ni tampoco de la moraleja que sirva de escarmiento, ni nada de nada. Es simplemente decir lo que vio, lo que supo, lo que es cierto. . . ¿Es necesario, me dije, que esto se sepa? No lo sé, no lo sabré nunca porque temo que las letras vencidas de su pasado puedan ser ajadas, rayadas, envilecidas por lectores gambusinos de lo caliente sólo y no de lo ardiente que es este libro terrible.[4]

[4] Mora, *Del oficio*, prologue by María Luisa Mendoza (Mexico City: Editorial Samo, 1972), 10–1. My translations.

> [Antonia brings me her novel, her story, her writing, her life, her convict's confession, without any literary pigeonhole, because it is not a sociological study or a eulogy of eroticism; even less is it pornography or a moral tale that serves to teach a lesson, or anything else. It is a simple telling of what she saw, what she knew, what is true. . . . Is it necessary, I asked myself, for this to become known? I don't know, I will never know, because I fear that the tale of her defeated past could be crumbled, torn up, and dirtied by low-minded readers interested only in what is hot and not what burns in this terrible book.]

Mendoza, of course, has promoted the book and prologued it for publication. Her introduction also offers official recognition of the real existence of the woman, Antonia Mora, and the manuscript that purports to tell of her early life. Thus, like the prologue to Santa, it provides an aesthetic frame to appreciate the following text. Furthermore, Mendoza acknowledges both the tradition within which it is likely to be read (sociological study, erotic literature, pornography, moral tale) and the readers that it is likely to find (aficionados of those genres), while she tries to have it both ways. The book will sell, she hints, because it is full of hot women and titillating details. It should sell because it endorses good moral values and teaches the middle-class reader about the painful, terrible reality of poverty in the lower classes. Will the readers who buy it for the "wrong" reasons change their minds on reading the work itself? Mendoza does not hazard a guess, leaving the question as open as possible, but suggests a rationalization for those of us who do not want to be identified with low-minded readers. Her gambit is identical to, though less obvious than, that of the blurb writer for del Campo's *La prostitución en México*: "Todas esas mujeres que se enlodan en la disipación y satisfacen la sensualidad tarifada: ¿qué son?, ¿de dónde vienen?, ¿a dónde van? . . . El presente 'dossier' sobre la prostitución en México hará reflexionar a muchos y, desde luego, divertirá y entretendrá a todos" [All those women who muddy themselves with dissipation and satisfy a purchased sensuality: Who are they? Where do they come from? Where do they go? . . . This 'dossier' about prostitution in Mexico will make many people think and, of course, will provide enjoyment and entertainment for all]. In all of these formulations, however, the right reasons (higher knowledge) and the wrong reasons (vile entertainment) belong to the same sys-

tem, the same theoretical structure. It is a structure that the memoirs retain, but only in a tense, double-voiced relation.

Indeed, the very concept of a *testimonio* by such a woman is theoretically fraught with contradiction. The linchpin of testimonial narrative for Western readers is its absolute reliability; the narrator must be a real witness, who gives evidence about "true" happenings. By definition, the loose woman, particularly the prostitute, cannot testify. Mendoza's and Gamboa's novels both highlight the invented quality of a loose woman's storytelling. On the one hand, she is relegated to silence as a victim with no personal agency, only a body that she sells on the market. Alternatively, she is silenced as inherently untruthful, reprimanded for an excess of agency and for irresponsibly trafficking in fantasies (and trite, secondhand fantasies at that). Del Campo says bluntly: "Las posibilidades de mixtificación de una prostituta suelen ser extraordinarias. Son capaces de contarse tres veces (o más) la misma historia—la suya, por ejemplo—reinventándola cada vez de cabo a rabo. . . . Esta imaginación desordenada, esta ausencia de discernimiento entre lo verdadero y lo falso, este sentimentalismo novelesco crea en las prostitutas una verdadera sed de aventuras" [A prostitute tends to have extraordinary possibilities for confusion. They are capable of telling someone the same story—their own story, for example—three or more times, reinventing it from beginning to end each time. . . . This disordered imagination, this absence of discrimination between truth and falsehood, this novelistic sentimentalism, creates in prostitutes a true thirst for adventure] (116–7). Curiously, del Campo sees the excessively active and creative imagination of these women as a sign of mental deficiency, subject to early detection in young girls: "De la incapacidad pragmática inicial deriva sistemáticamente un despego intelectual (que se manifiesta, por ejemplo, en una afición desmesurada por la lectura de novelistas sentimentales) y esto origina un descenso cotidiano del coeficiente de inteligencia" [A detachment from intellectual activities derives from an initial practical inability (which is manifested, for example, in an exceptional love of reading sentimental novelists), and from this point originates a daily decrease in the intelligence quotient] (116). I assume that implicitly del Campo is telling his readers that only young men can safely read such tales of famously book-maddened protagonists as *Don Quixote* and *Madame*

Bovary, or of such immoral women as *Santa*, since books adversely affect only female IQs and are symptomatic of purely female mental deficiencies. Males may become low-minded readers, but they will retain both their intellectual agency and their sanity.

The loose woman who writes is in the same double bind as the prostitute who speaks of her past. She points toward her life, but without license to discuss it, without the reader having to acknowledge her openly or accept her testimony as part of the socially real. She is, by convention, an unacceptable witness to her own reality, since she cannot be counted on to see the difference between truth and falsehood. In more abstract terms, she is, by definition, always already speechless and unreadable. In a highly influential formulation of the relation of women's sexuality to patriarchal discourse, Luce Irigaray notes: "Commodities, as we all know, do not take themselves to market on their own; and if they could talk . . . So women have to remain an 'infrastructure' unrecognized as such by our society and our culture. The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as 'subjects.'"[5] There is no place for woman as such in the social contract that Irigaray defines, except as a shifter of men's relationships to each other and as the alien otherness that establishes male selfhood. Sex, specifically the woman's sexuality, is the unspoken, silenced term that shapes the social contract, within which there is no place for a woman's subjectivity. Since there is no possibility of saying "I" except as an othered being, there can be no speech. Judith Butler succinctly frames the paradox: "To speak at all in that context is a performative contradiction, the linguistic assertion of a self that cannot 'be' within the language that asserts it."[6] Specifically, for an admittedly sexually active woman to speak within the Mexican social system, she must silence both her femaleness and her sexuality. Within the system, woman ventriloquizes or performs man, and there are no women except as a convenience of discourse to refer to female

[5] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 84. Irigaray's ellipsis.

[6] Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 116.

persons. Such, at least, is the state of affairs in the traditionally conceived formulation of a male-dominant society.

It all comes down to the fundamental question exercising me in reading these women's personal writings, these memoirs, these *testimonios*, these texts; that is, what theoretical frame can I give the discussion without recourse to unsupportable truth claims or to trite pronouncements about the domination and silencing of women? In his much-acclaimed book *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes the African American practice of "signifyin'," which is both a linguistic style of expression and a cultural ritual that always involves a double-voicedness, repetition with formal revision, and a play of ambiguity. Signifyin' is performance talk that calls attention to its performativity and is completely successful only if it convinces the target. As Gates reminds us, signifyin' on us theoretically in his own critical text, the standard English word *signification* "is a homonym of the Afro-American vernacular word. And . . . these two homonyms have everything to do with each other and, then again, absolutely nothing. . . . This confrontation is both political and metaphysical."[7] Gates extends the concept of signifyin' from a definition borrowed from literary critic and anthropologist Roger D. Abrahams: "the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures which arrives at 'direction through indirection'" (125). Elsewhere Abrahams gives examples: "It can mean . . . the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. . . . Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures. Thus it is signifying to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying, 'my brother needs a piece of cake.'"[8]

The effects of signifyin', however, far exceed one-upmanship. Taking as his key notion the concept of "arriv[ing] at direction through indirection," Gates lucidly demonstrates how signifyin' participates in yet subtly undermines dominant discourse. It is, as he says, both a form

[7] Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45.

[8] Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), 51–2.

of troping and a style of political action. In terms of the Mexican social context, it is a kind of *transa* that requires not only a victim but also an appreciative audience.[9] The signifier needs to have his or her style recognized, optimally, by the person signified on. In the interstices of this double-voiced style the loose woman inserts herself as a subject, or as a third term. The women in these books have certainly discovered another method of trading their own use value, in producing a written work that corresponds neither to conventional autobiography nor to *testimonio* but to a third kind of self-writing. On an analogy with Gates's study, we can say that they are testifyin'.

Often, as del Campo complains, the prostitute sells her body by selling her story, or by creating an imagined narrative for the client's pleasure; decoupling the body from the text is the next step, and Gamboa, among others, has already made it part of a common currency linking writing and (metaphorical) prostitution. When the loose woman/writer brings her textual goods to market, she is only literalizing the established metaphor and eliminating the middleman. At the level of publication and book sales, then, projects overlap as the mechanism of exchange is exploited and reversed to allow a formerly silent nonsubject to speak.

The two terms of this negotiation, this *transa*, remain the loose woman/storyteller and the client/reader. On the one hand, the reader expects the life story to give at least the impression of authenticity. It should speak to and within the growing body of life stories by people marginal to the collective experience of the reading public, books collected by anthropologists, journalists, and historians and marketed as *testimonios*. The text's charm and its charge come partly from its status as a genuine document referring back to a specific female body in which its veracity can be tested. Thus, for example, we can appreciate the value of the prologue by an officially recognized truth bearer like Elisabeth Burgos-Debray (who edited *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* [I, Rigoberta Menchú]) or María Luisa Mendoza, who describes the physical characteristics of the narrator and at some level attests to her concrete physical existence in *Del oficio*. Furthermore, the book's use value

[9] *Transa* seems to derive from the Spanish *transacción* (transaction) and can be loosely described as a con game or sting operation.

for the reader is intimately connected to its presumed truth value; the currency that the loose woman exchanges within the textual economy is both her particularity as a human being and her representability as an extension of a collective, if marginal and generally silenced, experience.

On the other hand, unlike canonical *testimonios*, where the very root of the word defining the genre presupposes a juridical truth telling, the loose woman's *testimonio* is presumed less trustworthy. Since the narrator is, again by definition, an unreliable storyteller—we readers may uneasily suspect that we are victims of a *transa*—and since the life described in the text continually involves *transas* of one sort or another, in bodies and stories and goods, what is finally authenticable is only the staged performance of the *transa* in the referential frame of the narrator/author/testifier. More than other *testimonios*, then, the works that I look at here operate within the borderlands of the genre, in a *transa*-inflected, transitional culture. In telling us the trivia of their lives, invented for us or in conjunction with us, these women are testifyin' to their own storied transactions, both physical and literary.

Open the book *Del oficio*, by Antonia Mora, and flip past the title page to the prologue. Here is the first paragraph:

> Antonia es una niña grande con los ojos inusitados de verde y de vida, de estupor. Es menuda y debió de ser frágil. De piel muy blanca, el único maquillaje que luce, el de sus redondos ojos, la adelgaza más aún. Antonia tiene una hija inmensa, triste y adolescente, preocupada como la madre en todos los problemas sociales que urge desentuertar. Antonia tiene un marido joven, elegante. Abogado. Es campeón de las viejas causas difíciles, un loco enamorado de la justicia. Antonia tiene una casa con ventanas a las horas del día que la miran escribir, coser bellos trajes Chanel, hermosísimas capas coloradas de Stendhal, abrigos de Colette, pijamas para ir a bailes o trajes de soiré para dormir; cocinar ricos platillos japoneses o convertir en cristales higos y piñas, naranjas y membrillos. (9)

> [Antonia is an overgrown child with unusual, speaking green eyes, full of life and amazement. She is tiny and must be fragile. Her skin is very white, and the only makeup she wears—on her round eyes—makes her look even slimmer. Antonia has an immense, sad, adolescent daughter, as concerned as her mother with social problems that need to be straightened out. Antonia has an elegant young husband. A lawyer. He is a champion of the old, difficult causes, a madman in love with justice. Antonia has a house with windows full of daylight that watch her write; watch her sew beautiful Chanel suits, lovely red Stendhal capes, Colette overcoats, pajamas to go to balls or evening dresses to go to sleep; watch her cook delicious Japanese meals or turn figs and pineapples, oranges and quinces into sweetmeats.]

With her opening sentences Mendoza serves up to the reader a richly seductive banquet of innocence and sensuality, of an unusual and beautiful woman (slim, elegant, with pale skin and green eyes) surrounded by all the markers of an upper-class life. The vision of chaste but sensual, matronly good taste is essential, because it provides the reader with all the codes needed to understand the Cinderella story that follows, to recognize the narrator as a jewel shining in the mud of her surroundings, a pearl among swine, a diamond in the rough.

By beginning the prologue in this manner, Mendoza reminds us of the fluidity of the protagonist's identity. Mora becomes the quintessential madonna, indistinguishable from similarly privileged women. Yet the story she shares with Mendoza, and with us, is of another, altogether different life, dealing in naked truth rather than in glittering costumes and succulent fruits. In the extremes of both poverty and privilege, it offers a glimpse into two lifestyles that are each, on their own terms, exotic. Mendoza's catalog ends on a pious note: "Todo esto no volverá a pasar nunca más. Cuando el lector como usted y como yo entendamos a la mujer de otra manera, a manera de imagen de Dios. Y cuando México sea un país de hombres mejores . . . de hombres, simplemente" [This will never happen again. When the reader like you and I understand woman in another way, as God's image. And when Mexico is a country of better men . . . of men, simply] (12; Mendoza's ellipsis). Simply, facilely, mechanically, Mendoza offers Mora's *testimonio* as an exotic fruit and as a morality play to solve Mexico's gender-related problems.

Mora's own narrative begins, stripped of rhetorical flourish and garnishes, as follows:

> Mi madre estaba en la puerta de la accesoria. La oía:
> —Ven guapo. Mira que vas a disfrutar.
> Y a mí me decía:

—Estoy jugando. Vete para adentro a jugar con los demás niños. Mis amigos y amigas jugaban a lo mismo. (17)

[My mother was standing in the outbuilding doorway. I heard her: "Come on, handsome. Let me show you a good time." And she told me, "I'm playing. Go inside and play with the other children."
My boy- and girlfriends played the same game.]

The daughter of a prostitute, Mora almost inevitably, from her barely pubescent childhood until her jailing for theft and assault with a deadly weapon, also sells her body. She was born in abject poverty, and when told to "go play," she and her friends choose the adult games familiar to them from their mothers' profession, dressing up in their mothers' clothes and making believe they are prostitutes and clients, or entertaining themselves by inflating and deflating used condoms discovered lying around the area. Unsurprisingly, but still hurtfully, "decent" women do not allow her to play with their children (49). Mora tells us of unintentionally shocking one of her teachers when she answers the stereotypical question "What are you going to do when you grow up?" with a matter-of-fact "Voy a coger, señorita" [I'm going to fuck, miss] (23). At fourteen, she is kidnapped and raped—her first sexual experience. Her mother's reaction is to beat her up for being so stupid as to be tricked into giving her virginity away for free. The lesson is pounded into the girl: "Tengo que coger, y cobrar para que todo esté bien" [I have to fuck, and to charge for it, so that everything is OK] (64). It is not the only time she is raped, but as she becomes integrated into the sites of prostitution, the streets and rent-by-time hotels, rape becomes simply an occupational hazard, a constant threat that adds to her fear and her hatred but does nothing to prevent her from going back onto the streets.

Mora's trajectory is familiar from our reading of nineteenth-century novels and viewing of twentieth-century movies. The young woman runs off with an equally young man. She suffers abandonment and abortion. She learns to drink and to steal. She commits and suffers assault. She pays off corrupt police with kickbacks from her robberies and with sexual favors. She details her dealings with pimps (not so good) and with matrons of houses of prostitution (excellent). She tells of working in strip joints: "Era una sensación rarísima sentirme utilizada y sin coger a nadie" [It was a really strange sensation to feel I was being used but without having to fuck anybody] (90). At each stage Mora's simple, straightforward prose draws back the veil of exoticism from the ugly, sordid details. As Mora becomes more deeply involved in serious crime, she portrays herself more as the victim of circumstance, trapped by acquaintances into acts that horrify her. At the same time, the protagonist of the *testimonio* has vitality and strength no longer present in the pale, sad, beautiful lawyer's wife. She asks pointed questions and stands her ground when challenged. Where the lawyer's wife has dedicated herself to unspecified worthy social causes, the young prostitute takes a more direct approach to women's concerns, and her critique of male-defined customs and sexual practices is transparent:

—Bueno—le dije—, ¿tú nunca le das el mameyoso a tu mujer?
—No, nunca.
—¿Por qué? Si es igual que todas.
—Pues porque se prostituye, se volvería morbosa. Además que no es igual. Es una dama decente.
—Entonces, ¿cómo haces con ella?
—Normalmente, como debe ser.
—¿Qué tal si le da tentación por saber? (92)

["So," I asked him, "don't you ever turn your wife on?"
"No, never."
"Why not? She's the same as any other woman."
"Because it would turn her into a prostitute; she'd catch something. Besides, it's not the same thing. She's a decent woman."
"So, how do you do it with her?"
"Normally, the way it ought to be."
"What if she gets tempted to find out?"]

Good question.

When Mora is required to give legal testimony after her arrest, things become even more interesting. It seems that everyone involved in the courtroom proceedings has a *transa* to complete: everyone is testifyin': "Tanto los agentes como nosotros mentíamos" [Both we and the police lied] (142). To the police psychiatrists, Mora lies again, and she assumes that they are dishonest with her, too. Although she is uncertain what story will best serve her purposes, she cannily avoids

anything that might resemble a confession; a fairy-tale story of an artistic family (or, alternatively, a poor but honest mother) seems safer. On the first day she tries out one story; on the next day, another: "Al día siguiente decidí no contarle nada verdadero. Le narré una infancia que no era mía" [I decided not to tell anything that was true. I narrated a childhood that was not mine]; and on the following day she comes up with a different, equally elaborate narration for the nosy shrink (148–9).

Similarly, Mora learns about tailoring a story to the public when her case piques the interest of the news services. "¿Puedo decir lo que pienso?" [Can I say what I think?] Mora asks a reporter who is advising her on a statement to the press. When he says yes, she begins with a summary of the abuse she has suffered in the prison system, which the reader has already been told in far greater, more horrific detail: "El médico legista no me hizo examen a conciencia y por lo tanto no me reconocieron los golpes ni el aborto que me ocasionaron los agentes de la jefatura y . . ." [The state-appointed doctor did not give me a complete examination and so did not notice the bruises or the miscarriage that the police officers caused and . . .]. The reporter interrupts her: "No, no. Eso no causa simpatías en el público. Mejor di otra cosa" [No, no. That won't gain the audience's sympathy. Better say something else] (163). Essentially, she is to say something innocuous and to look as repentant and as pretty as possible for the cameras. The book ends with Mora's transcription of her brief statement—a very different statement from the exposé she had planned, and one written for her by personnel at the television station: "Estoy arrepentida de haber faltado a las leyes y de haber delinquido, insultando de esta manera a la sociedad, así como a la seguridad y moral de todo ciudadano honesto" [I am sorry for having broken laws and committed crimes, for insulting society and the security and morality of all honest citizens] (163). Her saccharine performance of a rehabilitated criminality leads directly to the work's puzzling final sentence, which hints at complicity between the former prostitute and the television producer (should we extend the analogy to the book publisher?), a completed *transa* of which the television audience (the readers of the book?) are the willing victims, the third term in a slippery game of signifyin' and testifyin': "El hombre me dio las gracias junto con cien pesos" [The man

gave me his thanks, along with a hundred pesos] (163). Would it not be naive to ask about the truth status of this *testimonio* that we have just finished reading?

While Mendoza does not act on the performative possibilities of her interaction with the former prostitute, the *testimonio* reveals its constructed quality and its latent storytelling power. Mendoza's prologue to Mora's book creates a piously conventional coda in which the prostitute's core goodness is recognized and everything falls into place—a happy ending of upper-middle-class prosperity. But of course, Mendoza's (and Mora's) *transa* was successful. The book was published, and at least a few of us "lentos" purchased it, read it, and even took the time to write about it. Mora and Mendoza signify on us. The signifyin', testifyin' voice reminds us of the power of story to affect the real, and also of the slippery boundaries of the real when it comes into contact with an able *transa*.