

Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*:  
Modes of Representation

by

Zachary A. Fischman  
Class of 2013

An essay submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors from the College of Letters

## ***Acknowledgments***

To the Wesleyan University Center of the Humanities, for providing a warm and compelling context in which to begin this project.

To my parents and brother, Mom, Dad & Eli. Without them, I quite literally wouldn't have finished this project.

To Avery, and Ari, and Haley, and our beautiful cabin at 59 Home. Always a soft place to land. To Paul and the friends of 66 Home, for making me feel welcomed in a way I hadn't known.

But mostly to Priscilla, my most formidable interlocutor and dear friend, who bookends my adventure:

“I glanced too, at the books, they were numerous, untidy and miscellaneous. But one shelf was a little neater than the rest and here I noted the following musical phrase, oddly familiar: *Hamlet, La morte d'Arthur, The bridge of San Luis Rey, Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, South Wind, The Lady with the Dog, Madame Bovary, The Invisible Man, Le Temps Retrouvé, Anglo-Persian Dictionary, The Author of Trixie, Alice in Wonderland, Ulysses, About Buying a Horse, King Lear...*”

***The Lazarus Project: the Novel as Möbius Strip***

In 2008, Aleksandar Hemon published his first and only full-length novel, *The Lazarus Project*, which treats the life of a middle-aged writer named Vladimir Brik. Like Hemon himself, Brik is a Sarajevo-born Bosnian, who emigrated to Chicago in early 1992, just before the start of the Balkan Wars. The portion of the novel that deals with Brik's life spans a time period in 2004, wherein Brik applies for and receives a grant to work on a book project about a historical figure named Lazarus Averbuch. Averbuch was a young Jewish immigrant who "survived the Kishinev pogrom" and escaped with his family to "Chicago, in late 1907."<sup>1</sup> Brik receives funding for his project from the Glory Foundation, courtesy of Bill and Susie Schuettler, which is enough to finance a trip across Eastern Europe. With his photographer-friend Rora, Brik uses this money to "follow Lazarus all the way back to the pogrom in Kishinev, to the time before America."<sup>2</sup>

Brik envisions his book to be a historical narrative about the strange death of Lazarus Averbuch. As Brik describes it:

"I wanted my future book to be about the immigrant who escaped the pogrom in Kishinev and came to Chicago only to be shot by the Chicago chief of police. I wanted to be immersed in the world as it had been in 1908, I wanted to imagine how immigrants

---

<sup>1</sup> Roth, Walter, and Joe Kraus. *An Accidental Anarchist: How the Killing of a Humble Jewish Immigrant by Chicago's Chief of Police Exposed the Conflict Between Law & Order and Civil Rights in Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America*. San Francisco: Rudi Publishing, 1998. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Hemon, Aleksandar. *The Lazarus Project*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008. 46. All references to the novel are henceforth parenthetical

lived then. I loved doing research, poring through old newspapers and books and photos, reciting curious facts on a whim” (41).

The novel thus announces that it will be functioning within three temporal registers: the past of Lazarus Averbuch; the present of Vladimir Brik; and the implied future of Vladimir Brik, in which he will write the book that tells the story of Averbuch’s life.

While in conversation with the grant-giving Susie Schuettler, Brik responds to an inquiry about his project: “Yes, [Lazarus’s past] is hard to understand. That is why I would like to work on that book” (15). In trying to understand Lazarus’s “difficult” past, Brik emphasizes the role that his imagination will play: he wants to “reimagine what [he cannot] retrieve” about Lazarus’s history, and conversely, “see what he [cannot] imagine” (46). By following Lazarus’s story back to Eastern Europe, and steeping himself in information about that time period, Brik hopes to produce a historical narrative about Lazarus’s life, and to do so, he will rely in part on the use of his imagination. Indeed, the use of one’s imagination as a means to engage with history becomes a central concern of Hemon’s novel.

Part of what qualifies Brik for this project is the way in which his own life is reflected in Lazarus’s past:

“I had to admit that I identified easily with those travails: lousy jobs, lousier tenements, the acquisition of language, the logistics of survival, the ennoblement of self-fashioning. It seemed to me I knew what constituted that world, what mattered in it” (41).

Brik's research project is thus rooted in an investigation of an historical character whose life resembles his own. Having escaped a similar threat of violence in Eastern Europe, Brik believes that his own experience as an immigrant will allow him to better understand Lazarus's history. In other words, Brik will use his own experience as a *means* to understand Lazarus's history.

By drawing this parallel so explicitly, however, Brik runs the risk of projecting himself onto that history, in a way that could distort an understanding of Lazarus's life. Indeed, when Brik relies on his imagination and personal experience to write about Lazarus, all he can produce, as he says, is a "costumed parade of paper cutouts, performing acts of high symbolic value" (41). His characters "tear up at the sight of the Statue of Liberty" and "cough consumptive blood in large, poignant clots," fitting snugly into established images and narratives about the prototypical American immigrant experience (41). By focusing in on the process of writing history, Brik draws attention, on the one hand, to the ways in which images and narratives can flatten and distort historical experience. On the other hand, however, Brik also alerts the reader to the way in which personal identification with an historical situation can aid in the production of meaningful and engaged historical writing. Since Brik concedes, however, that his own narratives have been known to flatten history, through their use of heavy-handed symbolism and inappropriate projection, the reader is forced to scrutinize any of the narratives he presents for precisely that type of distortion.

The novel follows Brik and Rora across Eastern Europe, from Lviv to Chisinau, and finally to their hometown of Sarajevo, while Brik conducts the research for his “future book” (41). Shuffled between the sections that deal with Brik’s journey are alternating chapters that tell the story of Lazarus Averbuch, the historical subject about whom Brik is planning to write. These sections tell the story of Lazarus and his immediate family, who “struggle[d] to resurrect in America,” warring against a culture that “raved against the sinful perils of unbridled immigration” and “against attacks on American freedom” (41-2). This narrative, which makes up half of the text of the book, is the very story about an “immigrant who escaped the pogrom in Kishinev” that Brik intends to write (43). These sections are Brik’s own Lazarus Project, in distinction from the novel we are reading, and they cohere into a “book-within-the-book.”

In the narrative of Brik’s journey across Eastern Europe, there is no mention of Brik beginning to write his Lazarus Project – or, for that matter, of Brik beginning to write an account of the journey he takes in order to write his Lazarus Project. In the last scene of the book, however, when Brik is being treated for a broken hand in a Sarajevan hospital, he is in conversation with the attending physician:

“Did the boy take [Rora’s] rolls of film, too?”

No, she said. [Rora] left them at home.

That’s good.

That makes no difference at all.

I am sorry.

No reason to be sorry, Azra said. Let’s take care of your hand now. You will

need it for writing” (292).

Thus, one must assume that the entire work being read – both the sections about Lazarus’s life *and* the account of Brik’s journey – is at the same time the work that has *yet* to be written by Brik, after the book has ended. In other words, the narrative of Brik’s journey ends at the very moment – in the narrative, though not in reality – at which its transcription is set to begin. In this way, the structure of *The Lazarus Project* can be compared to a Möbius strip, which, in its final scene, sends the reader back to the beginning of the book.<sup>3</sup>

On the first reading of *The Lazarus Project*, the reader is unaware that the narratives he has just read are precisely the narratives that Brik will begin to compose at the moment the book ends. The reader experiences the story of Brik’s journey simply as “life-lived” by Vladimir Brik. At the end of the narrative, however, when we realize that Brik will write about his experiences in Eastern Europe *in addition* to his narrative about Averbuch, the two narratives that make up the book become subject to an entirely new level of scrutiny. If during the first reading, we understand Brik’s journey as “life-lived,” the second reading forces us to assess the text’s construction, understanding it now as Brik’s “life-written.” The stories suddenly become a set of consciously juxtaposed narratives, concerning the life of Lazarus Averbuch and the experience of preparing to write that life.

---

<sup>3</sup> Dolinin, Alexander. “The Gift.” *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995. 139. This conception of the novel as Möbius Strip comes from Dolinin’s reading of Vladimir Nabokov’s final Russian novel, *The Gift*.

The Möbius strip-like narrative structure of the text also highlights the order in which Brik composes the two narratives that make up *The Lazarus Project*. The narrative of Brik's journey, composed in the past tense, depicts him as not yet having written his Lazarus Project. However, these sections appear right alongside the story about Lazarus that Brik has apparently yet to write. Since these narratives function within two different temporal registers, we can only assume that Brik composes these narratives simultaneously – or, in indeterminable sequence – from a point in the future. There are no internal markers by which to discern whether the composition of one narrative precedes that of the other. In fact, a set of distinct linguistic parallels – to be discussed later on - that exists between the two narratives suggest that the narratives were composed simultaneously. Brik sits down at the end of his journey to compose both narratives, pulling from all the research and experiential material he's gathered along the way.

### ***Sources of Information***

The narrative of Brik's journey demonstrates that Brik has three distinct types of experience to draw for the composition of his narratives. We follow Brik from his life in Chicago with his wife Mary, through his "research...about Lazarus and anarchists and the sumptuous palette of American fears," and finally to Eastern Europe, where he searches for the historical Lazarus (47). Brik thus has at his disposal the experience of his surroundings in Chicago and Eastern Europe; the experience of conducting research on Lazarus Averbuch; and the emotional/subjective experience of his various relationships (i.e. with his wife,

Mary, or Rora, with whom he travels). Brik incorporates information from all three of these experiential sources into both of the two narratives that he will write. The linguistic parallels that exist between the two narratives can be accounted for by this understanding of Brik's source material. Thus the "lichen-colored lake" that Olga looks upon with Lazarus, "considering all the good things that might happen one day," is a detail plucked from Brik's experiences in Chicago, where he sees "the lake [with] the lichen color it acquires when the winds are northwesterly" (2, 35). Pulled from the same source material, the two narratives start to mirror each other in this way, thematically linking Brik and Lazarus across the void of a century.

An additional source of information that Brik can draw upon is the series of photographs that Rora takes while traveling with Brik across Eastern Europe. When Brik initially receives the funding for his trip, he asks Rora to come along and "take photos" (50). Although Brik is unsure how he will use the photographs, he tells Rora that he will "put some of them in [the] book when [he writes] it" (50). When Rora is murdered at the end of their journey, Brik takes possession of the undeveloped rolls of film, which Rora had "left...at home" (292). Presumably, Brik has these rolls developed and looks at them before sitting down to write his narratives. Brik follows through on his promise to Rora and includes twelve of his images in his book, but more importantly, these photographs prompt certain passages of description in Brik's text.

These twelve photographs are matched by another eleven images, which Brik gathers from the Chicago Historical Society. Just as he pairs Rora's images

with the sections of the text that narrate their journey, Brik takes archival images from the newspapers that reported on Averbuch's death and places them directly before the sections that narrate Lazarus's life. Both sets of images are presented in a uniform manner, emerging from a mysterious black background, and serve the structural purpose of separating one chapter from another. The ways in which *The Lazarus Project* engages with the medium of photography are numerous and varied and deserve much attention, but a complete discussion of their effects on the text are outside of the purview of this project.

### ***Brik's Motivations***

Brik has repeatedly expressed a desire to write a book about Lazarus Averbuch, but what are his motivations? To begin, Brik is married to an Irish woman named Mary Field, a successful "neurosurgeon at Northwestern Hospital" (15), to whom he consistently feels he has to prove that "he [is] not a wastrel or a slacker or a lazy Eastern European, but a person of talent and potential" (17). Brik lives in constant fear that Mary will leave him "for a successful anesthesiologist whose eyebrows she had long admired across the surgical table" (42). Mary has never been particularly "supportive of [his] literary ambitions," and when Brik initially describes his project to her, she "could not help but cut gaping holes in [his] Lazarus canvas" (41). Because of her lack of support, Brik "avoided thinking about [his] Lazarus project, as though [his] marriage depended on it," but "the more [he] tried to avoid it, the more [he] thought about it [and] the more he needed to do it" (42). Much of Brik's

motivation to begin his project, then, comes from deep-seated insecurity about his marriage, and the need to impress his wife.

Although this source of Brik's motivation is decidedly personal in type, he does express curiosity about the death of Lazarus Averbuch:

"Lazarus came to Chicago as a refugee, a pogrom survivor. He must have seen horrible things; he may have snapped. Was he angry when he went to Shippy's house? Did he want to tell him something? He was fourteen in 1903, at the time of the pogrom. Did he remember it in Chicago? Was he a survivor who resurrected in America? Did he have nightmares about it? Did he read books that promised better, new worlds? I speculated and rambled..." (43).

Toward the beginning of this passage, Brik seems to be motivated by a genuine sense of curiosity, even by a sense of empathy. As the passage moves on, however, Brik's questions become less relevant to the story of Averbuch's life, and more relevant to the story of his own. Brik has already made his sense of identification with Lazarus clear, and the questions toward the end of this passage could just as easily be asked about his own past as they could about Lazarus's. In this way, the sense of curiosity that motivates Brik's research is complemented by a desire for self-understanding.

Although personal identification with one's chosen subject of study is not sufficient ground to delegitimize that venture, Brik's research quickly turns into a form of egocentrism:

"That was one of the reasons (unspoken, to Mary, or anybody) why I absolutely needed to write the Lazarus book. The book would make me become someone else, go either way: I could earn

the right to orgasmic selfishness (and the money required for it) or I could purchase my moral insurance by going through the righteous process of self-doubt and self-realization” (133).

Suddenly, Brik’s project has become a means to attain “orgasmic selfishness,” or, alternatively, “self-realization” (133). Regardless of how his project turns out, Brik has couched the possibility of success in entirely selfish terms. The accurate representation of Averbuch’s history will be the vehicle through which Brik can become the “someone else” that he wants to be (133).

### ***Brik and Autobiography***

Brik’s sense of identification with Averbuch’s history, paired with his desire to become “someone else,” points toward an additional type of motivation for his project (133). In a number of ways, Brik feels that by writing the story of Averbuch’s life, he is writing the story of his own. For instance, Brik believes that he “knows what constituted [Lazarus’s] life,” precisely because he can see his own experience as an immigrant reflected in Lazarus’s past. In her article “Does Autobiography matter? Fictions of the Self in Aleksandar Hemon’s *The Lazarus Project*,” Wendy Ward attributes Brik’s desire to write about Lazarus Averbuch to what she calls an “auto/biographical demand.”<sup>4</sup> Those who are marked by this demand find ways to “tell [their own] stor[ies] through [those of] others.”<sup>5</sup> On this demand, Ward cites Leigh Gilmore, who, in her book, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, notes that this method of writing is often

---

<sup>4</sup> Ward, Wendy. “Does Autobiography Matter?: Fictions of the Self in Aleksandar Hemon’s *The Lazarus Project*.” *Brno Studies in English* 37.2 (2011): 185-199. 186.

<sup>5</sup> Ward, 186.

used in instances of trauma, when “the portals [for self-expression] are too narrow and the demands too restrictive.”<sup>6</sup> “In this scenario,” Gilmore writes, “the autobiographical project may swerve from the form of autobiography even as it embraces the project of self-representation.”<sup>7</sup>

Brik’s auto/biographical demand, however, does not stem from a traumatic experience. Rather, Brik’s demand stems from the conspicuous absence of traumatic experience in his life, and feelings of guilt for having left Sarajevo “just before the beginning [of the siege] and miss[ing] the whole shebang” (18). When in conversation with various Bosnians who survived the siege, Brik is repeatedly reminded of his inability to understand what [the war] was really like,” since he had been absent for the siege. These types of comments create a situation in which Brik is unable to discuss his own experiences, since any emotion he might express about the war – save guilt for having missed it – is necessarily invalidated by virtue of his having been in Chicago during the “best parts” of the siege (18). Brik’s Lazarus Project thus provides him with a context in which he can adequately express the experience of his own past, mediated by the experiences of the century-old Lazarus Averbuch. Indeed, when Brik discusses his desire to write about Lazarus, he could just as easily be speaking about his desire to understand his own absence from the siege of Sarajevo: “I needed to reimagine what I could not retrieve; I needed to see what I could not imagine. I needed to step outside of my life in Chicago and spend time deep in

---

<sup>6</sup> Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. 72.

the wilderness of elsewhere” (46). What appeared at first to be a project motivated by a set of selfish desires, can now be understood as a productive method for the adequate expression of Brik’s past.

### ***Brik as (Auto)Biographer***

Brik, however, emerges as an unknowing and largely unqualified biographer of Lazarus Averbuch. Brik has never attempted to compose a piece of historical writing at this scale, let alone about the time period of turn-of-the-century Chicago. The only writing that we know Brik to have done is the column that he writes for *The Reader*, which he worked on while teaching “English as a second language” (31). In his column, Brik wrote “about the experiences of [his] students,” which were “not at all unlike [his] own: looking for a job, getting the Social Security number, finding an apartment, becoming a citizen, meeting Americans, dealing with nostalgia, that sort of thing” (31). The column didn’t “pay much, but a lot of people read it,” because they felt it was “honest and personal and they found the quirky immigrant language endearing” (15, 31-32). Even Susie Schuettler expressed how much she enjoyed reading Brik’s column: “it was amazing,” she said, “how different the things you knew well looked through the eyes of a foreigner” (14). Brik’s column is thus a series of biographical or autobiographical vignettes, which treat the experiences of immigration and assimilation. His columns do not require rigorous historical research for their production, and instead draw on first hand and subjective

---

<sup>7</sup> Gilmore, 3.

experiences as their source material. The columns are not written for an academic audience, but rather for a generalized readership of a newspaper like *The Reader*.

This type of writing, tailored for a generalized American newspaper audience, does not qualify Brik particularly well to embark on an academic/historical project like researching the life of Lazarus Averbuch. Although Brik may love “doing research” and “poring through old newspapers,” this type of curiosity does not necessarily endow him with the ability to produce a conscientious and precise narrative of Averbuch’s life (41). Paired with his desire to express his own story through his Lazarus Project, his lack of experience with historical writing reminds us of the possibility of inappropriate projection, which could distort the veracity of his portrayal of Lazarus. Moreover, Brik’s recent acquisition of the English language has the potential to complicate his endeavor, as he intends to draw upon historical materials that are composed mostly in English.

The way in which Brik describes his research process situates his Lazarus Project at the intersection of historical and personal forms of discourse. While he will conduct the type of historical research necessary to compose a verifiable history of Lazarus Averbuch, Brik hopes to express a more subjective, or personal, understanding of Averbuch’s life. For instance, Brik may write that Lazarus stood on the front porch of 31 Lincoln Place on the morning of March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1907, waiting for George Shippy to answer his front door, but he also wants to know if Lazarus was angry on that “late winter” morning, when the “pure

snows of January” were still “tormenting the city” (2). Brik’s use of poetic language to describe the atmosphere of the cold March morning on which Lazarus was killed alerts the reader that Brik is looking to write a narrative that combines historical fact with subjective description. “Did [Lazarus] want to tell [Chief Shippy] something?” Brik wonders (43). This is the type of subjective information that will be impossible to find in archival and historical material about the Averbuch affair, let alone on a trip across Eastern Europe, where Brik follows the route of Lazarus’s emigration. Brik will thus “reimagine what [he cannot] retrieve” (46).

Brik admits that he will meld historical and imaginative types of discourse in his narrative about Lazarus’s life. His Lazarus Project thus becomes a project of blending, of interlarding the factual with the subjective, in order to produce a narrative about “a Lazarus who struggled to resurrect in America” (41). As Wendy Ward writes, Brik “imagines, revises, and assembles Lazarus’s life details not under any documentary expectations, but instead, to create new narrative forms that will allow for the simultaneous expression of multiple pasts.<sup>8</sup> Through the composition of his Lazarus Project, Brik will give expression to the “story of the Averbuch affair,” and in doing so, to the story of his own past.<sup>9</sup> As Wendy Ward writes, the work is “as much a story of Brik and his

---

<sup>8</sup> Ward, 187.

<sup>9</sup> Roth, ix.

attempt to visualize Lazarus's story as it is a narrative devoted to *justifying and resurrecting Lazarus*" (emphasis mine).<sup>10</sup>

### ***Historical Imagining***

This blending of fictional and factual discourses is apparent on the first page of the novel. Brik describes Lazarus walking into "a grocery store at Clark and Webster – Ludwig's Supplies, it is called," where Lazarus sees "sausages hanging from the high racks like long crooked fingers [and] cookie boxes [with] the lives of whole families painted on them – happy children, smiling women, composed men" (3). Lazarus interacts with a number of people in the store: he sees that "Mr. Noth's walking stick is crooked," and that his "tie is silk but stained" (4). "I will never be like him," Lazarus thinks to himself (4). When asked if he would like anything, Lazarus "returns to the counter and points at the rack with the lozenge jar" (5). The young man

"...taps his finger on the jar with nickel-sized white lozenges, the cheapest kind, and offers a dime to Mr. Ludwig. He has money to spend on pleasure, he wants to show them. I am just like everybody else, Isador [his friend] always says, because there is nobody like me in the whole world" (5).

Lozenges in hand, Lazarus makes his way to "Chief Shippy's door, [with] another lozenge dissolving under his tongue" (7). Lazarus "waits for the lozenge to disintegrate completely before he rings the bell," only to have the door answered and be killed shortly thereafter (7).

---

<sup>10</sup> Ward, 188.

Based on the historical data available about Lazarus Averbuch, there is no way that Brik – or Hemon for that matter – could possibly know that Lazarus went to this specific grocery store and bought these specific lozenges. The only historical material that connects Lazarus to these lozenges is an article from “[t]he *Daily Journal* [that] reported that a box of lozenges [was] found in the dead assassin’s possession.”<sup>11</sup> Brik takes a simple fact and spins from it an entire narrative scene, which effectively describes the historical atmosphere of Lazarus’s Chicago. In this way, Brik blends historical fact with fictional invention, melding together fictional and nonfictional discourses in order to communicate historical experience.

The scene itself makes subtle reference to various ways in which historical reality can be represented. While reading posters on a bulletin board in the grocery store, Lazarus sees that “[n]ext Sunday at the Bijou...Joe Santley stars in *Billy The Kid*” (5). Then, when leaving the store, Lazarus “tries to look over [a] newsboy’s shoulder at the headlines, but the newsboy – hatless, with a scar across his face – scampers away, hollering: ‘Pat Garret, the Lawman Who Shot Billy the Kid Dies in a Gunfight’” (6). By including two references to Billy the Kid in this beginning chapter, Brik (and Hemon) calls attention to the types of representation that can be used to portray historical reality. The filmic and fictional portrayal of Billy the Kid is juxtaposed against the newspaper report of the same story, demonstrating the various methods used to present a single historical situation. Moreover, since there is no way for Brik to have known if

---

<sup>11</sup> Roth, 20.

Lazarus truly did see these instances of Billy the Kid, Brik includes these references precisely because he wants to highlight issues of representation.

A similar instance of historical invention occurs when Olga, Lazarus's sister, is walking through a crowded street in Chicago, after Lazarus has been killed. A woman suddenly appears in front of her, wearing a "dirty white dress and mushroomlike hat, her eyes febrile" (169-70). Olga "tries to get around her, but the woman steps in front of her," and speaks to her "with a voice between a hiss and a whisper: 'He whom you love is ill'" (170). Olga tries to elbow the woman aside, but the woman continues: "But this illness is not unto death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified" (170). Getting increasingly nervous, Olga "smacks the woman with the back of her hand; she feels her knuckles bounce off the woman's cheek bone, her skin breaking" (170). The woman responds by saying "Your brother will rise...Lazarus shall rise. Our lord will be with us" (170).

Similar to the situation with Lazarus in the candy store, there is no way that Brik or Hemon could know if a woman actually approached Olga in this manner, speaking lines verbatim from John 11. Thus, we must assume that this scene is constructed for a particular aesthetic effect. As composed by Brik, this scene demonstrates that his intention in writing the narrative of Lazarus's life is to resurrect the image of a historically maligned figure. By blending the discourses of historical and fictional writing, Brik (and Hemon) will resurrect the image of the historical Lazarus.

### ***Textual Production***

The Möbius structure of *The Lazarus Project*, however, has the curious effect of obscuring the process of textual production. Although we are told that Brik plans to write a narrative about Lazarus Averbuch, we are never told that he begins it. The narrative of Brik's journey constantly reminds us that he is collecting information for his project, but he never describes what form that project will take. Rather, we are simply given sections of writing about Lazarus Averbuch alongside a narrative about Brik preparing to write it. Brik illustrates the process of *preparing* to write his Lazarus narrative, but never discusses his writing process, or the way he ends up constructing his book. Brik certainly never specifies that his project will be a pair of juxtaposed narratives, as *The Lazarus Project* itself is presented. This obfuscation of the writing process presents a compositional ambiguity: while we may be able to assume that Brik has composed the narratives that make up Hemon's novel, *The Lazarus Project*, we cannot say with confidence that Brik is responsible for the composition of *The Lazarus Project* as we have it in our hands.

This compositional ambiguity alludes to a third level of narrative construction: that of Aleksandar Hemon himself. Since the process of textual composition is obscured by the narrative structure of the novel, and Brik can only be considered responsible for the composition of the two narratives that make up *The Lazarus Project*, Aleksandar Hemon must be considered responsible for the construction of the book we hold in our hands. This third trip around the narrative Möbius strip allows the reader to assess the entire construction of the novel, taking into account the wide range of genres and

discourses working within it. Questions about source material and genre, which were first asked at the level of Brik's narration, can now be assessed at the level of Hemon's construction.

### ***Hemon and (Auto)Biography***

The most compelling ramification of this third level of narrative construction is the way in which Brik's "auto/biographical demand" can be compared to Hemon's own. Much of Aleksandar Hemon's fiction is marked by a complicated relationship to autobiography. Critics and book reviewers are quick to draw parallels between Hemon's own life story and those of his characters, who, like Hemon and Brik, have often been deeply affected by the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. Hemon is repeatedly asked questions that seek to parse his fictions, asking him to point out which parts are "true" and which parts are "made up." Much like his character Brik, however, Hemon unabashedly blends the fictional with the factual, seeking instead to produce texts of hybrid genre. Since Hemon presents his work under the label of fiction, though, these types of questions are usually posed in terms of degree: "How autobiographical are the stories themselves?" asks Menachem Kaiser in an interview with Hemon for *The New Yorker*.<sup>12</sup> This kind of question is to be expected when dealing with fiction that clings closely to an authenticable reality, and could be just as easily asked of Brik's own Lazarus Project, as it could be of Hemon's. Moreover, Hemon does

---

<sup>12</sup> Kaiser, Menachem. "The Exchange: Aleksandar Hemon." *The New Yorker Online*. June 9, 2009 <<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2009/06/the-exchange-aleksander-hemon.html>>.

little work to “demarcate his own experiences as an immigrant in America...from those of his narrators,” leaving the reader “all the more anxious to certify the tight “identification bind” provided by the label of fiction.”<sup>13</sup>

The parallels between Aleksandar Hemon and Vladimir Brik are too striking to be ignored. As Wendy Ward writes, “Hemon clearly makes little effort to demarcate his own experiences as an immigrant in America...from those of his narrators, other than providing different names; they continue to resemble one another quite intimately.”<sup>14</sup> Both Hemon and Brik were born in Sarajevo, and “left Bosnia-Herzegovina in early 1992 for a one-month cultural exchange programme [sic] in Chicago, but with the war breaking out during [their] visit[s], [they] were prevented from returning home and forced to watch [their] homeland strife unfold through 24-hour CNN frames.”<sup>15</sup> Further connecting Hemon to Brik, Hemon himself took a trip just like Brik’s, “after receiving the MacArthur Foundation ‘genius grant,’ along with a good friend, Velibor Bozovic, who is a photographer and whose photographs of the trip are interspersed with the historical photographs of Averbuch and others.”<sup>16</sup>

With such strong connections made between the fictional Brik and Hemon himself, questions that seek to parse his fictions are to be expected. Hemon’s response to these types of question, however, has remained consistent

---

<sup>13</sup> Ward, 186

<sup>14</sup> Ward, 186.

<sup>15</sup> Ward, 187.

<sup>16</sup> Ward, 188. At the level of Brik’s textual construction, Rora is responsible for the photographs. At Hemon’s level of construction, though, we can trust the

since he began writing fiction. In several interviews, Hemon offers rather dismissive remarks about the genres of memoir and autobiography. He tries to keep these labels away from his work, since they seem to describe texts that function in a “confessional mode” that leaves little room for “imagination.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Hemon believes that these confessional modes “engage the reader” on ethically ambiguous, “voyeuristic terms.”<sup>18</sup> Although he may begin with some biographical facts of his life as raw material for his stories, Hemon wants to transform those experiences into a “construction that is no longer mine, that is not me.”<sup>19</sup> In responses to Menachem Kaiser’s question about the fictionality of his stories, Hemon replied: “For some reason or another, I compulsively imagine scenarios alternative to what happens to me. To my mind, my stories are not autobiographical; they are *antibiographical*.”<sup>20</sup> Hemon’s fictions contain bits and pieces of personal experience, but more importantly, they contain what did *not* happen to him.

The artistic process wherein an author draws on the varied experiences of his or her life in order to compose an aesthetic product is hardly a new concept in fiction writing. Aleksandar Hemon’s repetitive rejection – or complication – of this autobiographical impulse, however, is particularly

---

colophon and understand the photographs to have been taken by Velibor Bozovic.

<sup>17</sup> Ward, 186.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Reyn, Irina. “Exile on Any Street: In Conversation with Aleksandar Hemon.” *Guernica*. February 2010. <[http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/1532/not\\_melted\\_into\\_the\\_pot/](http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/1532/not_melted_into_the_pot/)>.

<sup>20</sup> Kaiser.

interesting when one addresses his work as an autobiography. As James Wood notes, Hemon “has made a kind of running autobiographical fiction of his actual circumstances – the childhood in Sarajevo, the exile in America, the early hardships in Chicago.”<sup>21</sup> Wood continues: “He likes to use his family name in his fiction, and to refer recurrently to certain relatives and family histories, but the autobiographical veracity of that fiction seems architectural rather than foundational.”<sup>22</sup> This distinction, between the superficial or deep application of autobiographical material in Hemon’s fiction, is precisely the point at which Hemon’s work is problematized. In order to discuss the ways in which Hemon works with the literary discourse of autobiography, it is necessary to further discuss the conventions of the autobiographical form.

### ***Autobiographical Forms***

In the literary critical discussion of the genre, autobiography is notoriously difficult to define. This difficulty is due in large part to the wide spectrum of texts that claim to be autobiography; to find a definition of the form that can account for even a majority of such works has been a difficult endeavor. As Paul John Eakin explains in his introduction to Philippe Lejeune’s *On Autobiography*, since “autobiography is not generically distinguished by formal constituents, linguistic register, or audience effects [it] therefore has no history

---

<sup>21</sup> Wood, James. *The Fun Stuff*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2012. 96.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

as a genre.”<sup>23</sup> Eakin’s understanding of the debate highlights the wide variety of texts that need to be accounted for by a definition of autobiography. As Eakin suggests, however, despite this lack of formal consistency, there nonetheless seems to be a category of texts that cohere under the heading of autobiography.

This sense of coherence can be attributed to the content, as opposed to the form, of these alleged autobiographies. At the most basic level, autobiographies seem to consist in a singular subject telling the story of his or her past from the point of view of his or her present. With this understanding of autobiography, much of *The Lazarus Project* can be understood on autobiographical terms: the sections of the book that are dedicated to Brik’s Eastern-European past are told from the point of view of his American present. Moreover, the entirety of *The Lazarus Project* must be approached on at least quasi-autobiographical terms, since much of what happens to Hemon’s characters has happened to him.

Before discussing the ways in which Hemon’s work engages with the discourse of autobiography, it is necessary to have a more specific definition of the form. For the purposes of this project, the definition used will be the one presented by the French literary critic Phillippe Lejeune, in his work *On Autobiography*. Taking account of autobiography as a “complex and unstable category, historically speaking, and eschewing any pretense to an essentialist or idealist objective,” Lejeune defines autobiography as “retrospective prose

---

<sup>23</sup> Lejeune, Phillippe. *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989. vii.

narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.”<sup>24</sup> Although Lejeune’s definition of the form is purposefully capacious and accommodating – to account for the aforementioned range of formal variation – he does stipulate the presence of certain autobiographical conditions: the work must concern an individual life; the work must be composed retrospectively – written about the past from the perspective of the present; and the narrative must concern the life of a “real” person. In this way, Lejeune’s definition roots autobiography in three discourses: that of the “individual”; that of authenticable reality; and the temporal, or historical. These conditions are “a question of all or nothing” for Lejeune; if a work fails to exhibit these characteristics, the work cannot be categorized as autobiography.

Lejeune’s definition of autobiography, however, is quickly problematized. As Lejeune himself realized, his definition is necessarily limited in one respect. Thus formulated, there is no way “to identify a clear line of demarcation between autobiography and the autobiographical novel.”<sup>25</sup> As Eakin understands this problem, “there is absolutely no way to distinguish between the [autobiography and the autobiographical novel] on the basis of internal textual evidence.” Without a mode of external verification, the authenticity of an alleged autobiography can never be corroborated.

---

<sup>24</sup> Lejeune viii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Lejeune's definition of the autobiographical form posits a structural equivalence between the writer of the narrative and the primary subject of that narrative. In other words, Lejeune stipulates an equivalence between the narrator and the protagonist of a text that claims to be autobiography. This type of relationship, however, can happen as easily in fiction as it can in autobiography, with its claims to non-fiction. A fictional text, for instance, in which the narrator is recounting the story of his or her life is quite plausible. Moreover, a semi-fictional text in which a "real" narrator tells the story of his or her life in fictional discourse is equally plausible. As one inches away from the strict authenticity of an autobiography, the concept of the "autobiographical novel" becomes comprehensible. Without a mode of external verification, then, the autobiography is virtually indistinguishable from the autobiographical novel. Considered in this light, Lejeune's definition of autobiography is a bit *too* spacious; his definition can account for both fictional and non-fictional types of discourse. This territory – between fictional and non-fictional discourses – is precisely the ground on which Brik *and* Hemon construct their respective Lazarus Projects.

It is necessary to momentarily suspend this line of inquiry – the discussion of an "autobiographical novel" – in order to introduce the way in which Lejeune manages to seal his porous definition. In order to construct a definition of the autobiographical form that doesn't necessitate a mode of external verification for assuring authenticity, Lejeune introduces the concept of

“le pacte autobiographique (the autobiographical pact).”<sup>26</sup> Simply put, “le pacte autobiographique posits a formal equivalence between the author, narrator, and protagonist of an autobiographical text. As Eakin describes le pacte, “Lejeune could now identify a *textual* criterion by which to distinguish between autobiography and fiction, namely the identity of the proper name shared by author, narrator, and protagonist.”<sup>27</sup> To remedy the need for a mode of verification external to the text, Lejeune’s equivalence of author, narrator, and protagonist positions the author as the link to an extra-textual, verifiable reality. In other words, the reader of an autobiographical text can be assured of the author’s sincere effort to narrativize his or her life in a manner that is true to reality.

Although Lejeune thought his definition to be airtight once again, there are still a number of ways in which this conception of autobiography can be complicated. Now that there is an absolute equivalence drawn between the author, narrator, and protagonist, it becomes possible to play with the presentation of these personas in such a way that makes them no longer resemble one another. Indeed, as Eakin argues, “unlike biography, where the resemblance of the protagonist of the narrative to the verifiable facts of the life of the historical model constitutes the decisive criterion for authenticating its structure of reference, in autobiography such resemblance is of distinctly

---

<sup>26</sup> Lejeune ix

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

secondary importance.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, the author, narrator, and protagonist need not resemble one another in an autobiography, since the reader has been assured from the outset of their *necessarily* coterminous identity, by way of their shared proper name. The intended effect of an autobiography might in some cases be to demonstrate that despite vastly different modes of presentation, the author, narrator, and protagonist are bound by a singular identity.

### ***Le Pacte and The Lazarus Project***

If “le Pacte” is the only structural element necessary for a work to be deemed autobiographical, then *The Lazarus Project* cannot be considered an autobiography. At no point in the text is there a structural equivalence drawn between Aleksandar Hemon, Vladimir Brik (in his capacity as internal narrator), and Vladimir Brik (in his capacity as central protagonist), and thus it does not engage with Lejeune’s formulation of “le Pacte.” Indeed, only two of the three textual consciences share in an identity bound by a proper name: that is, Vladimir Brik as protagonist and Vladimir Brik as narrator. Thus, when *The Lazarus Project* is considered as a text constructed by Aleksandar Hemon, there is no way to read it as his autobiography.

Although on its largest scale *The Lazarus Project* is not a strict autobiography, Hemon engages the discourse of autobiography in order to construct his fictions. If we zoom in by a degree of fictional construction and consider *The Lazarus Project* to be a work composed by Vladimir Brik, much of

---

<sup>28</sup> Lejeune, x.

the text can be assessed in autobiographical terms. Satisfying the requirements of “le Pacte,” Vladimir Brik provides the “proper name,” stipulated by Lejeune, which binds author, narrator, and protagonist into a singular identity. Much of the text is concerned with the narrator of the story of Brik’s life, told from the point of view of the present. In this way, Aleksandar Hemon engages the discourse of autobiography in his *fictional* construction, *The Lazarus Project*, transforming large swathes of the text into what can be termed fictional-autobiography. That is, Vladimir Brik is not an identity tied in any way to authenticable reality.

Hemon’s use of autobiographical discourse to narrate Brik’s life points to another way in which autobiography can be considered in Hemon’s novel. Returning to Gilmore’s conception of the “auto/biographical demand,” by which people “tell [their own] stor[ies] through those of others,” we can understand *The Lazarus Project* as an attempt by Hemon to tell his own story through that of his fictional construction, Vladimir Brik.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Hemon’s “autobiographical project ...swerve[s] from the form of [strict] autobiography even as it embraces the project of self-representation.”<sup>30</sup> Just like his character, Hemon is marked by an auto/biographical demand that stems not from traumatic experience, but rather from the conspicuous absence of traumatic experience in his life, and feelings of guilt for having “missed the whole shebang” (18). Hemon’s *Lazarus Project*, a veiled autobiographical venture much like Brik’s own *Lazarus Project*,

---

<sup>29</sup> Ward, 186.

<sup>30</sup> Gilmore, 3.

provides him with a medium in which he can give simultaneous expression to the experience of *three* pasts: that of the (real) Lazarus, that of the (fictional) Vladimir Brik, and that of the (autobiographical) Aleksandar Hemon.

### ***Testimonial Form (By Way of Example)***

To tell one's own story is, in a sense, to testify to one's experiences and existence. Especially when viewed in the context of the Balkan wars and turn-of-the-century Chicago, the concept of testifying to atrocity becomes particularly relevant. The discourse of testimonial writing, however, is rather different from the discourse of autobiographical writing. As a textual form used to cope with the trauma of historical experience, testimonial writing has moved across history: starting with testimonies about the Holocaust, the testimonial form became particularly relevant to the experience of violent social change in Latin America, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The form was then notably used again during the Balkan Wars, when "testimonies [were recorded] about the war and genocide in Bosnia."<sup>31</sup> To introduce the concept of testimonial writing, I will discuss a brief situation regarding Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché woman who is most closely associated with the form of testimonial writing in literary critical discourse.

The Sixteenth International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association was held in April of 1991, at a large conference hotel in Washington, D.C., as tensions were trending toward war in Yugoslavia. John Beverley, a

literary and cultural critic from the University of Pittsburgh, was scheduled to deliver a conference talk on the testimonial writing of Rigoberta Menchú Tum. Menchú, an indigenous Guatemalan woman of the Quiché ethnic group, had come to prominence in 1986, when her account of the Guatemala Civil War, *Yo, Rigoberta Menchú*, was published. Menchú was invited to be the conference's guest of honor, and would be in the audience for Beverley's talk.

Beverley's lecture that evening relied heavily on the work of a young anthropologist named David Stoll, from the University of California at Berkeley. Stoll had given a lecture a year earlier at Berkeley, as part of a conference on "Political Correctness' and Cultural Studies," in which he "raised questions about the factual veracity of some of the details in Menchú's testimonio."<sup>32</sup> The conference had been relatively small, and since his lecture had not been delivered to an audience of Latin Americanists, Stoll's findings had failed to make much of a stir. However, Julio Ramos – a friend of John Beverley's who was familiar with his academic interest in testimonial writing – was in attendance, and tipped Beverley off to the subject of Stoll's talk. Beverley and Stoll subsequently met, and Beverley asked Stoll for a copy of his conference talk, which he gladly furnished. Beverley phoned Stoll after reading it to ask if "he

---

<sup>31</sup> Berman, Jennifer. "Interview with Aleksandar Hemon." *Bomb Magazine*. Summer 200. <<http://bombsite.com/issues/72/articles/2328>>.

<sup>32</sup> Beverley, John. *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. xiv.

could quote [him]" in his LASA talk, and despite some initial misgivings, Stoll consented in the spirit of the free "flow of information."<sup>33</sup>

Stoll attended Beverley's talk, and he recounts his experience in his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*:

"The room...was crowded with professors of literature. I slipped into the back just as Beverley began to speak. This was not my neck of the academic woods; the level of abstraction was beyond me. Suddenly Beverley swooped down from the clouds and dropped his bomb – my unfortunate findings about the death of [Menchú's brother] Petrocinio. Gasps and 'no's' escaped from some of the audience. Meanwhile, who should be holding forth in an auditorium below but [Menchú] herself... Not having intended to make a declaration, suddenly I was in a fix... I had no choice but to present [Menchú] with a copy of the twelve-page talk Beverley had quoted."<sup>34</sup>

Later that evening, Stoll caught up with Menchú in a corridor of the hotel. He handed her a copy of his talk, and tried to explain "that people in Chajul were giving [him] another version of how her brother [had] died."<sup>35</sup> Menchú responded in an even tone, reminding Stoll "that just as [he] had [his] work, she had hers."<sup>36</sup> These brief words constituted the entirety of their exchange; the reliability of Menchú's testimony had been undercut.

The situation at the Latin American Studies conference, and the years of argument it engendered, raise a number of questions about the nature of testimonial writing, which are particularly relevant to *The Lazarus Project*.

---

<sup>33</sup> Beverley, xiv.

<sup>34</sup> Beverley, xiv-xv.

<sup>35</sup> Beverley, xv.

Indeed, it asks the most basic questions about the authenticity expected of the testimonial form, and makes clear a number of assumption held about testimonial texts. For what constitutes testimonial writing? What kinds of relationships exist between the testimonial author and his or her text? Are testimonial texts necessarily truthful? What are testimonial texts written in response to? What demands to testimonial texts make on their readers?

### ***Testimonial Form***

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to discuss a set of conventions that are understood to delimit the form of testimonial writing. John Beverley takes up the nature of testimony as the structuring question of his 2005 book, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*. He presents the following working definition of testimonial writing:

“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.’”<sup>37</sup>

A number of Beverley’s assumptions are made clear in this definition of testimonial writing. First, Beverley stipulates that testimonio presents itself as a narrative: as something which has a consistent logic, and comes with a set of assumptions about coherence and temporality that a reader may take comfort in. Second, Beverley stipulates a confluence between the “narrator...of the events”

---

<sup>36</sup> Beverley, xv.

and “the real protagonist or witness” of those events.<sup>38</sup> Simply put, the person who experiences must be the person who narrates. By stipulating that the narrator and the protagonist must exist as a single consciousness, Beverly posits the authenticity of testimonial writing: since the testimonial narrator is the person who has experienced the narrated events, the reader can expect their account of those events to be authentic. This type of authentication is reminiscent of Lejeune’s “pacte autobiographique.”

It is important to note that Beverley is careful to make a distinction between the narrator and the author of the testimonial text, for they are often not the same person. For instance, in the case of *Yo, Rigoberta Menchú*, authorship of the text belongs not just to Menchú, but also to Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, the French anthropologist who transcribed Menchú’s narrative, and assembled it into book forms. This relationship between the author and compiler is reminiscent of the way that Hemon cobbles together the narratives that Brik, his internal narrator, composes. This relationship, though, intimates another of Beverley’s assumptions, which is that the narrator of a testimonial text doesn’t necessarily need to be literate, or have access to printing technology. Rather, the testimonial narrator (Brik) needs only an external agent (Hemon) who can transcribe his or her narrative, and cobble it into Beverley’s stipulated “printed form.” Indeed, the narrator of a testimonial text is often a marginalized or

---

<sup>37</sup> Beverley, 31.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

subaltern figure, whose access to education – or printing equipment – may be limited.

Beverley's definition of testimonio stipulates the presence of a narrative, but stops short of prescribing a form in which that narrative must be presented.

Beverley's definition continues:

“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*, nonfiction novel, or ‘factographic’ literature.”<sup>39</sup>

The textual categories that Beverley lists all gesture toward authenticity, or a certain type non-fictionality; “confession[s], diar[ies], and interview[s]” all seek to be understood in terms of authenticable reality. Indeed, none of the forms he lists seek to be understood as purely fictional. More importantly, however, is that Beverley understands testimony as a textual form that can “include” the other categories he lists. In this way, the textual category of testimonial writing is widened. Since *The Lazarus Project* itself appropriates the discourse of autobiographical writing, the book itself can be considered a type of testimonial writing. Hemon expresses this sentiment in an interview with *bomb* magazine: “Testimonies are, therefore, important, because they are not documents representing ‘truth,’ but experiences. And if you think of fiction as a way to

---

<sup>39</sup> Beverley, 31.

testify, then its role is crucial.”<sup>40</sup> Hemon thus considers fiction to be an arena in which testifying to autobiographic experience is possible.

Beverley’s broad conception of the testimonial form has two important ramifications. First, it means that the testimonial text has license to use the formal strategies endemic to any of the textual categories he lists. Moreover, it means that testimonial writing is not genre-specific, and might in fact supersede the category of genre altogether. Indeed, testimony can be a mode of narration that appropriates the conventions of various genres, producing texts that appear to be genre hybrids, much like *The Lazarus Project*. Beverley echoes this notion, recognizing the fluidity of the textual category: “[B]ecause testimonio is by nature a protean and demotic form not yet subject to legislation by a normative literary establishment, any attempt to specify a generic definition for it, as I do here, is at best provisional.”<sup>41</sup> Simply put, testimonial writing can come in many forms.

### ***Implications of Testimonial Form***

Although testimonio may be cobbled together from the conventions of other non-fictional genres, there are a number of implications that are intrinsic to the testimonial form. According to Beverley, “[testimonio] suggests the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense. [T]estimonio is a ‘*Narracion de Urgencia*’ – a story that needs to be told – involving a problem of

---

<sup>40</sup> Berman, Jennifer. “Interview with Aleksandar Hemon.” *Bomb Magazine*. Summer 200. <<http://bombsite.com/issues/72/articles/2328>>.

<sup>41</sup> Beverley, 31.

repression, poverty, subalternity, exploitation, or simply struggle for survival, which is implicated in the act of narration itself.”<sup>42</sup> First, Beverley considers the testimonial form alongside legal and religious discourses. Both legal and religious discourses work under the assumption that there is truth-value in the narrated experience of an individual; one *testifies* before a court of law, just as one may *testify* before their God, in order to solemnly attest to the truth of a situation. Testimonial narratives, however, are not couched in the terms of legal – or religious – discourse. Rather, as literary critic Anne Cubilié argues in her book, *Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights*, “testimonial literature claims the position of the witness [in legal discourse] who was there and knows what happened because she or he experienced it with his or her own body.”<sup>43</sup> In this way, testimonial narratives appropriate the terms of legal discourse in order to better assert their narrative truth. Brik’s Lazarus Project can thus be considered in a testimonial framework, since by writing his narrative, Brik is giving a testimonial voice to the legally maligned figure of Lazarus Averbuch.

The comparison of testimonial writing to legal discourse can be taken a step further. As Beverley writes, the testimonial narrative is a “story that needs to be told;” a story that carries with it a certain urgency. Having appropriated the status of “witness” from legal discourse, Beverley understands testimonial

---

<sup>42</sup> Beverley, John and Marc Zimmerman. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, 173

<sup>43</sup> Cubilié, Anne. *Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights*. New York: Fordhman University Press, 2005. 189.

narration as a textual form that allows for the effective expression of the narrator's urgent truth. Indeed, the need for the expression of that truth is often part of the narrator's struggle for success or survival, much as it is for both Vladimir Brik and Aleksandar Hemon. Stated differently, the narrator's survival – or “absolute need,” in Hemon's terms – is often contingent upon the successful expression (and consumption) of their narrative (33).

Beverley also recognizes the affinity between testimonial writing and certain forms of fiction, but is careful to discuss the ways in which they differ. “The first person narrative form and situation of the testimonio,” Beverley argues, “suggests an affinity with the picaresque novel,” which, loosely defined, follows a central character (narrator) through a series of distinct episodes. However, “even when [testimonio] approximates in content the kind of neopicaresque, [it] is a very different narrative mode.”<sup>44</sup> Beverley frames these differences in terms of intended effect. In testimonio, he argues, “[w]e are meant to experience both the speaker and the situation and events recounted as real.”<sup>45</sup> Fiction, however doesn't necessarily intend its events to be authenticable in the world of the reader. In this way, testimonio can be understood as a form that makes demands on the reader, since its events and thematic issues have occurred in the same world in which the reader exists. This distinguishes the testimonial form from the strictly autobiographical form, since there is no implicit ethical claim made on the reader that comes from the form of the text.

---

<sup>44</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 42.

### *The Testimonial Narrator*

These demands on the reader are reinforced by the way testimonio empowers its narrator. As in autobiography and the picaresque, testimonio “powerful[ly]...affirms the speaking subject itself.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, testimonio’s “dominant characteristic is that voice which speaks to the reader in the form of an ‘I’ that demands to be recognized, that wants or needs to stake a claim on our attention.”<sup>47</sup> Since the testimonial narrator is speaking to their personal experience of an urgent situation, she makes demands on the reader’s attention that rely on the affirmation of the narrator’s existence in authenticable reality. “We are meant to experience the voice of a real...person,” Beverley argues, and that is the “mark of a desire to not be silenced or defeated by the situation from which the narrator is speaking.”<sup>48</sup> This conception of the testimonial narrator functions well on all three narratological levels of *The Lazarus Project*. Brik manages to give a voice to Lazarus Averbuch and his family, by writing a testimony for them, which Lazarus “was going to write,” had he not been killed by George Shippy (212). Brik testifies to the pain of unintentional exile, which he experiences in Chicago while watching his native city fall to pieces. Hemon, circumscribing both of these narrative voices, thus appropriates the discourse of testimonial writing in order to comment on its construction, and demonstrate the pain of his own exile.

---

<sup>46</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 33.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 40.

The powerful affirmation of the speaking subject suggests that in testimonio, “it is the intentionality of the narrator that is paramount.”<sup>49</sup> According to Beverley, this narratorial intention is so great that their narrative can outweigh any necessity of formal genre convention, much as Hemon does with *The Lazarus Project*. This opens up space for the narrator to be understood as a “complier,” for not only is the testimonial narrator compiling experiences from their life in order to compose a narrative – as both Brik and Hemon do to construct their Lazarus Projects, they may also be compiling the conventions of other genres in order to adequately give narrative form to their experiences. In his fiction, Hemon assumes the role of compiler, piecing together bits of experience – as well as narrative conventions – in order to narrativize the lives of his characters.

Further discussing the differences between testimonial and fictional forms, Beverley notes that testimonio “is not so much concerned with the life of a ‘problematic hero’” as with “a problematic collective social situation that the narrator lives alongside.”<sup>50</sup> Not only is turn-of-the-century Chicago understood as a “complicated social situation” in *The Lazarus Project*, but present-day Chicago and Sarajevo at the time of the siege also fall into this category. The notion that testimonio can describe a “collective social situation” underscores Beverley’s earlier conception of the form: the testimonial narrative expresses both the individual and collective narrative that urgently needs to be told. This

---

<sup>49</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 33.

conception of testimonio further distinguishes the testimonial narrator from the narrator of fiction. The testimonial narrator is necessarily turned into an exemplary figure: one who speaks simultaneously for him- or herself and for those “alongside” whom he or she experiences a problematic situation. Lazarus Averbuch becomes an exemplary victim of social injustice in a harshly xenophobic atmosphere, just as Brik becomes exemplary as one who suffered hardship because of the war in Bosnia.

The voice of the testimonial narrator as that which “stand[s] in for the experience of the community as a whole” is a narrative convention of the genre.<sup>51</sup> This notion of “representativity” has the important effect of blurring the distinction between public and private spheres of experience, sometimes collapsing the distinction altogether. By narrating one’s personal experience of a collective situation, the testimonial narrator makes his or her voice function metonymically. “Each individual testimonio evokes an absent polyphony of other voices,” and the testimonial narrator understands their story as representative of the public experience.<sup>52</sup> By having their narrative evoke “other possible lives and experiences,” the testimonial narrator necessarily conflates the public and private spheres of experience. By narrating Lazarus’s life history, Brik turns an conspicuous public figure – a face who plastered the covers of every newspaper in Chicago – into a personal and relatable historical figure.

---

<sup>51</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 34.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

### ***Public/Private***

The relationship between public and private experience is so pronounced in the testimonial form that “[t]estimonio cannot affirm a self-identity that is separate from a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle.”<sup>53</sup> If the testimonial narrator were to describe him or herself in opposition to other participants in their collective situation, his or her narrative would cease” to be testimonio, and become in effect autobiography.”<sup>54</sup> The testimonial narrator would no longer desire to represent the “absent polyphony of voices,” choosing instead to focus on his or her subjective experience of hardship. Phillip Lejeune echoes this sentiment: autobiography does not seek to emphasize the collective experience, and rather “concern[s the narrator’s] own existence, focusing on his individual life.”<sup>55</sup>

It should not be inferred that the testimonial narrator is somehow more gifted or representative than another member of the community that he or she represents. The notion of the testimonial narrator as somehow endowed with the privilege to narrate her plight risks conceiving of the narrator as a type of epic or romantic poet – as someone who has special access to words and language as others may not. Echoing this sentiment, Beverley considers “testimonio [to be] a fundamentally demotic and egalitarian form of narrative, in the sense that it implies that any life so narrated can have a kind of

---

<sup>53</sup> Beverley, *Literature and Politics*, 177.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography*. London: Routledge, 2001. 4.

representativity.”<sup>56</sup> The absence of a polyphony of voices, however, is often felt so acutely in testimonial literature, that a common formal variation on the single-narrator testimony is “the polyphonic testimony, made up of accounts by different participants in the same event.”<sup>57</sup> Hemon adopts this formal variation of testimonio in *The Lazarus Project*, writing through several narrators in order to provide multiple personal accounts, which together gesture towards a collective, or paired set, of experiences.

Though the relationship between the narrator and his or her reader may come with concrete demands for action, it is important to understand the illusory nature of that relationship. “The sense of presence of a real, popular voice in the testimonio,” Beverley argues, “is in part illusory.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, as with any text, the reader is confronted with a simulated reality effect, which is produced by the narrator – or author – who, “according to norms of literary form and expression,” constructs a text from various source materials. However, to destabilize this relationship between narrator and reader would be, in the case of testimonio, to deprive the text of its “peculiar aesthetic-ideological power.”<sup>59</sup> Beverley continues: “Because it is the discourse of a witness who is not a fictional construct, testimonio in some sense or another speaks directly to us, as an actual person might.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, through the textual collapsing of physical space between the narrator and her reader, testimonial narration brings the reader

---

<sup>56</sup> Beverley, *Literature and Politics*, 178.

<sup>57</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 34.

<sup>58</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 42.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

into a contact with its narrator, and in this way, can be understood as making ethical claims on the reader. Indeed, “[t]o subsume testimonio under the category of literary fictionality is to deprive it of its power to engage the reader in the ways indicated, to make of it simply another form of literature.”<sup>61</sup>

What, specifically, are the demands that the form of testimonio makes on its readers? According to Beverley, testimonio “always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability and complacency of the reader’s world must be brought into question,” precisely because the testimonial narrator and the reader exist in the same world.<sup>62</sup> It is in this way that testimonio further destabilizes the boundary between the public and private spheres of knowledge and experience; “The narrator in testimonio is a real person who continues living and acting in a real social history that also continues.”<sup>63</sup> Moreover, “[t]estimonio implies the importance and power of literature [or narrative] as a form of social action, but also [signals] its radical insufficiency.”<sup>64</sup> Summarily, it is the position of the narrator as authenticable recounter of the events she has witnessed, and the relation to a marginalized or embattled collective that can be said to define the narrative – and ethical – form of testimonio. As Beverley argues, “testimonio aspires not only to interpret the world, but also to change it.”<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Beverley, *Literature and Politics*, 175.

<sup>61</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 40.

<sup>62</sup> Beverley, *Literature and Politics*, 178.

<sup>63</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 42.

<sup>64</sup> Beverley, *Literature and Politics*, 178.

<sup>65</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 37.

### ***By Way of Conclusion***

By blending these types of discourse, Aleksandar Hemon is certainly trying to “interpret the world...[and] change it.”<sup>66</sup> By interlarding the factual with the subjective, and melding the discourses of autobiography, testimonial writing, and fact-based history, Hemon constructs a particular narrative form. Hemon “troubles the distinction between the historian or historiographer and the poet,” by working under the heading of fiction and appropriating the discourses of numerous types of historical writing.<sup>67</sup>

This distinction, between the historian and the poet, is described by Aristotle, in book nine of the *Poetics*. “The poet and the historian,” he writes “differ not by writing in verse or in prose [...] The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history, the particular.”<sup>68</sup> The poet differs from the historian, who writes things as they occurred, in that the poet writes things as they could be, or could have been. The poet thus works in the realm of the potential, while the historian only writes things as they were.

Hemon troubles and “ultimately dissolv[es] the boundaries between these two separate, even disparate discourses,” by combining the “possibility

---

<sup>66</sup> Beverley, *Testimonio*, 37.

<sup>67</sup> Wolf, Lynn. "Literary Historiography: W.G. Sebald's Fiction." *W.G. Sebald Expatriate Writing*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. 317-330. Print.

and potentiality of fiction with direct references to an extra-textual reality, as lived by individuals, recounted in historical texts.”<sup>69</sup> Hemon’s goal is not to construct a fiction that is rooted in history simply by making reference to specific historical moments. Rather, Hemon is “problematizing the writing process [of history and fiction], in addition to the standards by which we judge authenticity, documentary status, historical truth, and even truth in general.”<sup>70</sup>

As in the discourse of testimonial writing, Hemon is trying to make particular historical experience more widely known. His goal, he says, “is to find ways to relate to the lives outside one’s immediate experience, for which imagination is indispensable.”<sup>71</sup> *The Lazarus Project* thus becomes Hemon’s attempt to advocate for an imaginative – or “fictional – type of engagement with historical experience. Through his blending of types of discourse, and employing numerous modes of representation, Aleksandar Hemon promotes the writing of a new type of history.

---

<sup>68</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*. In: S.H. Butcher: *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. New York: Dover Press, 1951. 35.

<sup>69</sup> Wolf, 320.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Baker, Deboarh. Interview with Aleksandar Hemon. *Bomb Magazine Online*. <<http://bombsite.com/issues/999/articles/3175>>.

## Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Poetics*. In: S.H. Butcher: *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. New York: Dover Press, 1951. 35.
- Baker, Deboarh. Interview with Aleksandar Hemon. *Bomb Magazine Online*. <<http://bombsite.com/issues/999/articles/3175>>.
- Beverly, John and Marc Zimmerman. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, 173
- Berman, Jennifer. "Interview with Aleksandar Hemon." *Bomb Magazine*. Summer 2000. <<http://bombsite.com/issues/72/articles/2328>>.
- Cubilié, Anne. *Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights*. New York: Fordhman University Press, 2005. 189.
- Dolinin, Alexander. "The Gift." *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.
- Hemon, Aleksandar. *The Lazarus Project*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008. 46.
- Kaiser, Menachem. "The Exchange: Aleksandar Hemon." *The New Yorker Online*. June 9, 2009 <<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2009/06/the-exchange-aleksander-hemon.html>>.
- Lejeuene, Philippe. *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
- Reyn, Irina. "Exile on Any Street: In Conversation with Aleksandar Hemon." *Guernica*. February 2010. <[http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/1532/not\\_melted\\_into\\_the\\_pot](http://www.guernicamag.com/interviews/1532/not_melted_into_the_pot)>
- Roth, Walter, and Joe Kraus. *An Accidental Anarchist: How the Killing of a Humble Jewish Immigrant by Chicago's Chief of Police Exposed the Conflict Between Law & Order and Civil Rights in Early 20<sup>th</sup>-Century America*. San Francisco: Rudi Publishing, 1998

Ward, Wendy. "Does Autobiography Matter?: Fictions of the Self in Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project*." *Brno Studies in English* 37.2 (2011): 185-199.

Wolf, Lynn. "Literary Historiography: W.G. Sebald's Fiction." *W.G. Sebald Expatriate Writing*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. 317-330. Print.

Wood, James. *The Fun Stuff*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2012.