Latin American Testimonio: Uncovering the Subaltern’s Gender, Race, and Class

Sandra Henderson

The testimonial literature that has emerged in Latin America over the past four decades has challenged Latin American culture and influenced North American scholarship. Testimonio is regarded by many scholars as the truest voice of the oppressed in Latin America, the most authentic representation of subaltern lives. As such it has become a valuable primary resource for social historians. Because testimonials have principally been the work of women, testimonio has evolved as a gendered discourse that provides insight into women’s history and gender relations in Latin America. In contrast, the published discussion of Latin American testimonio has been dominated by male scholars. Ironically, it appears that this scholarly discourse has also evolved as a gendered field, yet it has largely ignored the gender issues in testimonio. Instead, the prevailing analysis of testimonio has followed the linguistic turn toward literary theory, and has focused on issues of authenticity and subjectivity. This preoccupation with literary criticism has tended to obscure historical issues and the differences that race, class, and gender make. The juxtaposition of female producers and male consumers of Latin American testimonio demands a gendered analysis.

Examples of testimonio include Carolina Maria de Jesus (1960), Elena Poniatowska (1969), Domitila Barrios de Chungara (1977), Doris Tijerino (1978), Rigoberta Menchú (1983), Claribel Alegría (1983), Hebe de Bonafini (1985), Alicia Partnoy (1986), Elvia Alvarado (1987), Esperanza Hernández (1993), and Benedita da Silva (1997). Testimonialistas have emerged from the range of new social movements and grass-roots organizations, such as Paulo Freire’s consciousness-raising literacy movement, the Christian Base Community movement and the influence of Liberation Theology, and peasant/worker organizing movements. George Yúdice argues that these forms of testimonial supersede the essential aspects of both Marxism and Christianity through Liberation Theology’s search for “popular weapons of self defense.”

Among these influences on testimonios are class analysis, solidarity with the poor, rejection of elitism, and consciousness-raising, all of which serve to undermine patriarchal master narratives. The focus of testimonio on grassroots activism, rather than aesthetics, is exemplified in subaltern women’s perspectives.

Testimonio is linked to the concept of the subaltern, Antonio Gramsci’s term for subjects of colonialism. The term was then taken up by scholars of South Asia engaged in cultural criticism, most notably Gayatri Spivak, who framed the essential theoretical question in her pivotal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Latin Americanist scholars began using the concept in the 1990s, and the Latin American turn toward subaltern studies and the accompanying theoretical analysis of testimonios is most clearly marked by the formation of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group in 1993. Within the realm of cultural studies, the term has developed as a reference to the poor in postcolonial, less-developed countries, especially in terms of subordination based upon gender, illiteracy, and indigenous status. Ranajit Guha has defined ‘subaltern’ as “a name for the general attribute of subordination . . . whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.” In the context of Latin American history, the term stands for “history from below,” social history, and the experiences of the “voiceless” and the vanquished. Testimonio thus represents the intersection of the
postmodern project of employing nonliterary, unofficial sources and the absence of written historical records among subaltern groups in Latin America.

Definition of testimonio has become increasingly contested due to the influence of cultural studies, but recent scholarship still generally refers to either of two well-known articulations. George Yudicé has defined testimonial literature as

an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history.6

John Beverley's definition also emphasizes witness authenticity:

By testimonio I mean . . . a narrative . . . told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts. . . . The word testimonio translates literally as testimony, as in the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense. . . . The situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself. The position of the reader of testimonio is akin to that of a jury member in a courtroom. Unlike the novel, testimonio promises by definition to be primarily concerned with sincerity rather than literariness.7

These definitions are instructive both for what they emphasize and for what they leave out. Since most testimonio has been the work of women, the inattention to gender is a significant oversight. Beverley's emphasis on the reader as juror also creates an interesting hierarchy of approval over women's perceptions of their own lives. Beverley has also characterized testimonio as 'speaking truth to power,' but his courtroom analogy implies that it is the North American reader who is positioned to decide whether or not the testimony offered by the female witnesses is true.

When gender has been acknowledged in North American analysis, it has often been to discount it as a relevant factor. In his introduction to The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America, Georg Gugelberger declares that testimonio is on the decline and then asks rhetorically, "Why was the testimonio considered to be so interesting?" He answers that it was because testimonio was caught up in "all the discourses of institutional battles in recent years" and ended up on the feminist agenda, because some feminists "apparently unjustifiably declared the testimonio women's discourse."8 Why this recognition of women's discourse is unjustified remains unexplained, but it would seem that women must perform as universal, gender-neutral representatives of their communities, or else be discredited by association with feminism.

In this view, real, justifiable discourse in the testimonios of Latin American women is found not at the level of a false and partisan feminist advocacy for "women's discourse," but rather at the level of "critical discourse" among Northern institutional elites. Gugelberger goes on to explain the real importance of testimonio and its context:

In the sixties and seventies numerous testimonios were published. In the late eighties progressive critics proposed new theories of representationality and
authenticity based on the increasing publication of testimonios. This happened precisely at a moment when poststructuralism and deconstruction eroded all hopes for representation and referentiality in literature. Thus, the testimonio becomes interesting not so much for what it says and how it says it (as literature per se), but rather for how it entered critical discourse and the institutional centers of higher learning, thereby dismantling our treasured notions of literature.9

The fundamentally gendered nature of testimonio in this context seems both obvious and subtle. The definition of the testimonialist as a community agent/witness often ignores the question of how that community is defined, and the ways in which women’s roles in their own declared communities are gendered. The Latin American women who have emerged to testify to the oppressions of their communities invariably declare that they are compelled to do so because of their gendered roles as mothers, daughters, wives and sisters. Nancy Saporta Sternbach notes that subaltern categories “have been elaborated exclusively by male theorists of testimonial literature, but it is striking that they elucidate women’s particular situations so eloquently without ever noting that they do so, or without alluding to women’s discourse specifically (i.e., breaking silences, giving voice, envisioning a new future, equipped with a new consciousness, aware of the relationship of the personal and the political).”10 Although a few male theorists have become more conscious of women’s particular roles, the theoretical debate over women testimonialistas is still dominated almost entirely by men, in curious juxtaposition with the conspicuous dearth of male testimonio.

It appears that the genre of testimonio is uniquely suited to women’s experiences. The intersection of personal and political that is a central theme in women’s history is also crucial in testimonio, as are themes of violation and silencing, and the emphasis on collective experience and communal voice. For women testimonialists and their interlocutors, the goals have also been “to document a vanishing way of life,” to refuse “to be rendered historically voiceless,” and to “counteract and denounce the official version of history.”11 The purpose of testimonio for women has often been to bear witness as survivors in order to preserve the memory of the dead, and “to avoid a national or collective amnesia” and to create a “foil to the official discourses of their countries who would silence them again. . . with whatever other tactic might be invented to discredit their voice.”12

The issue of the collective voice is part of what makes the testimonio distinct from other genres and suggests why it has become a female discourse. Most of the testimonios by women share a degree of distancing by the witness from a first-person singular subjectivity. Although most testimonio scholars address subject-position in terms of community representation, Lynda Marín has argued that this positioning suggests a gendered perspective, “the kind of politics these women are engaged in: not necessarily a reversal of power – of wrenching the ‘I’ from the patriarchy, the colonizer, the dominant position – but rather a transvaluing of the ‘we,’ so as to rescind its status as the necessary other against which the tyrannical ‘I’ measures its existence.”13 Lynda Marín notes the first person plural perspective in testimonios of Menchú, Alegria, Domitila, and Alvarado, and suggests that the “tension between consolidation and individuation . . . is nowhere more keenly mirrored than in particular post-1960s testimonials by Latin American women.”14 Benedita da Silva begins her testimonio with the avowal: "My life is replicated in the lives of the many Beneditas, Marias, and Terezas that I represent: poor black women from the favelas, the slums. . . . I know their stories, because I have lived it myself."15 The consciousness of women’s testimonio in this regard also suggests issues of relational/practical versus individual/strategic feminisms in Latin America and the importance of community to women’s
history.

Despite these practical issues, most of the analysis and criticism of *testimonio* has been oriented in postmodernist literary theory and poststructuralist cultural criticism. Ironically, the gendered lessons in *testimonio* have been largely ignored in favor of more traditional political issues and world systems models. The primary interest in *testimonio*, as Gugelberger has declared, lies not in women's lives, but in how *testimonio* affects North Atlantic academia and the canon wars of literature and culture. In this view, Rigoberta Menchú is a celebrity of genuine interest not because of the history of Guatemala, or women in Latin America, but rather in terms of what North American intellectuals have to say about her veracity, and what her story says about 'us.'

As Gayatri Spivak has observed of colonized subaltern women, the problem is not so much one of sources as it is the terms of the debate, which have left women little room from which to speak. It is impossible to retrieve that which was never allowed in the first place, i.e. an autonomous voice. Because "the colonized subaltern woman disappeared . . . the silencing of subaltern women, Spivak argues, marks the limit of historical knowledge."16 For historians, women's *testimonios* fill a critical gap in records that do not include sources for the experiences of marginalized women. *Testimonio*, therefore, expands our knowledge of history, and illustrates the integral importance of gender to *testimonio*.

Within the category of subaltern, the status of Latin American women is even more precarious because of the triple bonds of class, race, and gender. Sternbach points out that the very etymology of the word *testimonio* is derived from *testes*, which forces women into a position of resistance that is biologically defined as male: "The language of the genre itself manifest women's exclusion from it and from power. It is also interesting to note that the word *testigo* has no feminine form in Spanish. When women are witnesses, they must be referred to as "la testigo."17

These overlapping categories of oppression complicate women's *testimonio*; Sternbach offers the intriguing observation that "in testimonial literature, it is not the women who are conforming to a male model; on the contrary, the dimensions of male testimonial literature tend to incorporate those characteristics we normally attribute to women's discourse, that is the circumstances of viewing oneself as a marginal subject who has taken history into her or his own hands for the first time."18 Because women are in many ways held subordinate to men within oppressed communities, it would seem that women's testimony would be received as the most authentic subaltern voice precisely because of, rather than in spite of, their gender status.

The faultlines that women's testimony exposes can be seen in the contrasting responses to two exemplary *testimonios*, Carolina Maria de Jesus and Rigoberta Menchú. They stand at contrasting ends of the *testimonio* spectrum, in terms of era, region, subjectivity, politics, and literacy. De Jesus was one of the earliest Latin American testimonialists, and her *testimonio* diverges from the third-person plural, oral narrative *testimonio* model in that it is autobiographical and originated as a written text. An Afro-Brazilian slum dweller in São Paulo, a single mother of three, and an author, de Jesus was self-conscious of her role as a writer and as a witness to *favela* life, and she began keeping a diary in 1955. De Jesus submitted numerous plays, poems, essays and works of fiction to various publishers, all of which were rejected. De Jesus was "discovered" in 1958 by journalist Audálio Dantas, and edited excerpts from her diary were published as *Quarto de Despejo* in Brazil in 1960, and translated into English as *Child of the Dark* in 1962.

De Jesus's 'discovery' and publication coincided with a wave of optimism and populist reformism in Brazil that peaked around 1960 and ended with the 1964 military coup. Following
the initial publishing success of the early 1960s, Brazilians variously criticized de Jesus’s writings as inauthentic, fraudulent, illiterate, both too conservative and too radical, personal, trivial, anecdotal, racialized, obsolete and inaccurate. Under the new regime, the social criticism contained within her diaries was never revolutionary enough for the Brazilian left, mixed as it was with her emphasis on personal responsibility through hard work, sobriety, family support, etc. The diary called for leadership by elites and tougher police enforcement in the favelas, and statements by de Jesus after 1964 appeared to be supportive of the military dictatorship and critical of political activism. Yet at the same time, the criticism in Quarto de Despejo of social injustices, maldistribution of wealth, racism, and political corruption presented an unacceptable challenge to the social order under the military dictatorship and the rapid transformation toward an export-oriented economy.

Liberal optimism regarding de Jesus's racial assimilation proved unfounded. At a ceremony in her honor at the Academy of Letters and the University of São Paulo Law School held four months after the publication of Quarto, de Jesus was refused entrance, despite her new haute couture, because an usher did not believe that a black woman could have any business at such a function. De Jesus waited two years for her first royalty check from the publication of Quarto, during which time she was obliged to continue living in the favela as a scavenger. The book was also an international bestseller, translated into more than a dozen languages, but de Jesus lamented in a diary entry from 1966 that she had not benefited from the book’s great success:

There are ill-bred and insolent daughters whose sorrowful parents regret their birthday. I wrote Quarto de Despejo, the book that made me known. According to others, that book was worth millions. However, it brought me, the author, no financial independence. . . . My royalties were irritants and disappointments—Fatal Royalties.19

Although the book sold 100,000 copies during the first few months, and printing had to be interrupted because the plates warped from overuse, her eventual share of the royalties from the first two bestselling-years of Quarto de Despejo amounted to only $7,338. The book’s public reception was complicated by its implicit advocacy for a populist reform agenda that was no longer viable, as well as by its explicit critique of racism and race relations in Brazil during a time of myth-making regarding the new color-blind Brazilian nation.20 The 1999 publication of 37 notebooks of de Jesus's private, unedited writings from the 1960s further illuminates her social and political context. The edited diary published in 1960 portrayed a black woman who was "poor but honest", a favela dweller who rejected self-pity, criticized other blacks for their lack of ambition, and symbolized the possibility of social mobility.21 This 'liberal' impression of de Jesus was magnified by her editor, São Paulo journalist Audálio Dantas, who extensively deleted her criticisms of Brazil's myth of racial unity, the corruption of politicians, and the class, race, and gender solidarity that she expressed with other blacks, women, and favelandos.

Her popularity in Brazil faded rather quickly, as liberal reforms were reversed and the myth of racial harmony was discredited. The authenticity of Quarto de Despejo was seriously questioned in Brazil, with accusations that Dantas was the real author, because white intellectuals declared that a black woman of the favela was incapable of such writing. Robert M. Levine has argued that she was also rejected by elites because she "did not play the passive role prescribed for women, especially those rising out of lower-class origins."22 De Jesus wrote candidly about
her active sexual life in her diaries and criticized the sex roles of both women and men. She was eventually forced to sell the little cinder-block house that Quarto built, and move back to a favela. Carolina Maria de Jesus died in 1977, not only in poverty but perhaps more accurately of poverty, the victim of an acute asthma attack in the midst of slum conditions to which she had been forced to return.

Quarto has sold over one million copies in more than forty countries, and maintained a popular readership among North American and European students for nearly forty years, due largely to the fact it is assigned reading in as many as 300 college courses each semester in the United States. The book's popularity has endured primarily outside of Brazil, and especially in North America. In surprising contrast, her books have been largely ignored in Brazil; despite the fact that Quarto de Despejo remains the bestselling book in Brazilian publishing history, it went out of print in Brazil from 1976 until 1993. When her diary was finally republished in Brazil in 1993, scholars and critics again attacked it as a forgery, impossibly well-written for a black woman, and resumed the charge that Dantas must be the true author, despite his vehement public denials. They also dismissed de Jesus's criticism of racism, poverty, and gender relations in Brazil as naïve and exaggerated.

Rigoberta Menchú's 1983 book stands at the other end of the spectrum, as an example of testimonio that is oral in origin, collective in perspective, faith-based, and overtly political. Menchú addresses the genocidal war waged against the indigenous Mayan people of Guatemala by their own government during the 1970s and 1980s. In it, Menchú testifies to the rape, torture and murder of not only her family members, but of her community and her people. Motivated by her involvement in the Christian-base community movement, Menchú joined the Mayan resistance movement and eventually went into exile in Mexico. Menchú gave an oral narrative history of her experience while attending a conference in Paris to French journalist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, who edited it and arranged for its 1983 publication in Spanish as Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia, and in English in 1984 as I, Rigoberta Menchú. Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 as a result of her activism within the Quiche resistance to the Guatemalan army's genocidal war.

David Stoll's 1998 "exposé," Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans, has questioned the accuracy of Menchú's narrative. Although it was written years before Stoll's book appeared, Gugelberger's critique of testimonio in The Real Thing includes an assessment that aptly describes the controversy: "We are too familiar with the white male 'field worker' (alias anthropologist) or traveler who went to a faraway place, settled down in comfort for a year, and then gave us the 'truth' (usually a lie) about the other and the other society." Stoll's objections are based solely upon contradictory accounts by other native Mayan villagers, taken and translated by Guatemalan assistants (because Stoll does not speak Quiche) during Stoll's anthropological fieldwork.

In a recent issue of Latin American Perspectives devoted to the debate over the authenticity of I, Rigoberta Menchú, editor Jan Rus notes "the fact that not even Stoll claimed that the discrepancies he found in her book suggested that the genocide was not as she described it." Stoll admits in his book that Menchú's testimonio is essentially correct:

There is no doubt about the most important points: that a dictatorship massacred thousands of indigenous peasants, that the victims included half of Rigoberta's immediate family, that she fled to Mexico to save her life, and that she joined a revolutionary movement to liberate her country.
Rus summarizes Menchú's response to the questions that Stoll has raised regarding the specific details of her *testimonio*. Menchú has defended the discrepancies by explaining that “some of the details of her story had been changed to protect teachers and religious workers who had helped her but who in 1982 were still within reach of the death squads in Guatemala; others had been made more generic in order to make her story typical of a larger number of people.”27 While these alterations make Menchú’s *testimonio* less reliable than a sworn deposition, they are comprehensible, given the context and the risks involved.

For Stoll, the inaccuracies derive from Menchú’s discredited legitimacy as a witness: she romanticized the guerrillas and thus “encouraged the Guatemalan left and its foreign supporters to continue viewing the countryside as a contest among social classes, ethnic blocs, and structural forces.”28 Stoll argues that the responsibility for the genocide in Guatemala lies in part with the guerrilla movement itself, and that Menchú’s book provided international sympathy and support for the movement at a critical point in 1983-1984 when indigenous support within Guatemala had declined. Stoll thus suggests that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* served to prolong the violence and perpetuate the genocide by propping up the losing side through the misguided support of leftist activists and scholars in the United States.29

The heart of the dispute seems to hinge upon the fact, which George Yúdice acknowledges, that “political organizations, ranging from human rights groups to solidarity networks and sympathizing alternative publishers and media producers, in and outside of Latin America, have promoted these texts in ways that blur the boundaries between social science, political activism and literature.”30 This ‘blurring of genres’ is a central issue that links *testimonio* to both poststructuralist and feminist challenges to the idea of historical metanarrative, which is a way of asking whose history is recounted in Latin American battles between women and soldiers. This blurring is precisely what critics like Stoll find objectionable.

Stoll’s primary focus is on North American consumers of *testimonio* and the uses they have made of Menchú’s story. Stoll complains that “the underlying problem is not how Rigoberta told her story, but how well-intentioned foreigners have chosen to interpret it.”31 He goes on to decry the fact that “a new standard of truth is gaining ground in the humanities and social sciences.”32 Stoll’s dispute appears to have as much to do with the leftist, multiculturalist, postcolonialist trends which he perceives to be dominating North American academia as it does with Menchú’s historical testimony. Again, attention is focused not on the history of genocide in Guatemala, or on the gender lessons to be learned from Latin American women’s lived experience, but rather on the more pressing issue of North American ‘political correctness’. What is clear is that current debates over historical accuracy, or “facticity” as theorists would have it, are motivated by political ideologies in which women’s voices are invariably muted. As one scholar has argued, "it is not the testimonio's uncontaminated positing of some pure, truthful, native history that makes them so powerful, but rather their subversion of such a project."33 When women are the protagonists in such projects of subversion, they are subjected to special scrutiny, as gender inevitably comes into play.

The intellectual issue of what community Rigoberta Menchú “authentically” represents rarely focuses on women or questions of gender. Although Menchú has defined herself broadly, in terms of indigenous people, peasants, Quiché Mayans, and Guatemalans, she has also maintained a self-consciousness that incorporates gender as well as race and class in an integrated identity: “I will always have the face of a poor woman, my Mayan face, my indigenous face.”34 Menchú discusses women and gender explicitly in her second *testimonio*, *Crossing Borders*, 1998:
When we fight for our rights, we are called indigenous, but if we take our
demands further than indigenous rights, then we are called communists. If we
include women’s rights, we are not only indigenous communists but feminists too.
They put labels on us to devalue our struggle.35

Menchú also addresses the rape of women as a weapon of war throughout history and as a form
of genocide, comparing Guatemala and the former Yugoslavia:

If we, the women of the world, were to unite and organise, we could break down
the frontiers of silence with our cries of condemnation. We could raise the cause
of these women as a battle cry that would live forever in our common memory as
a gender, as the givers of life and creators of hope.36

Menchú refers to the function of rape within the conquest of the Americas and the gendered
dynamic of conquistador men raping “our ancestors, our grandmothers, our mothers, to breed a
race of mestizos. The result is the violence and cruelty that we are still living with today.”37
Menchú’s perspective integrates the oppression of women and indigenous people, and her
assertion of a “common memory as a gender” is explicit, no matter how ‘problematized’ by
North Americans. Her testimonio is clearly specific to her female identity and experience, such
as her status as a former domestic worker:

Some people still see me as that illiterate indigenous woman, that subversive born
in squalor. I’m still the domestic servant, as some mestizos in Guatemala City
refer to me. There is so much resentment against an indigenous woman being a
national leader.38

It is difficult to understand how this type of testimonial could be viewed as gender-neutral, much
less why that would be desirable, or how to make a distinction between the indigenous Menchú
and the female Menchú. Her testimonio speaks to the continuing extreme class divisions in Latin
American society, to institutionalized racial divisions, and the gendered nature of such
inequalities.

Perhaps the most significant attraction of testimonial literature for North Americans is the
compelling promise of authenticity, of unmediated proximity to the lived experience of recent
Latin American history, especially among subalterns. This has certainly been a central
motivation in the use of Child of the Dark and I, Rigoberta Menchú as primary sources.
Testimonio fills a critical gap in historical records that do not include the voices of subaltern
women. The historical use of testimonios is contested, however, because of the debate over what
constitutes empirical, verifiable evidence and the underlying issue of authenticity and testimonio.
Addressing problems of Indian history, Gyan Prakash has raised questions about the reliability of
sources that are equally relevant to Latin American testimonios:

If history functions as a discipline that renders certain forms of thought and action
“irrational” and subaltern, then should not the critique extend to the techniques
and procedures it utilizes? . . . Pointing out this rule assumes the existence of a
“public sphere,” which public archives and history writing are expected to
reproduce . . . canons of historical research cannot help but live a problematic life
in society . . . . The idea of "public life" and "free access to information" must contend with the fact that knowledge is privileged and "belongs and circulates in the numerous and particularistic networks of kinship, community, gendered spaces, and aging structures." If this is the case, then . . . how can we assume the universality of the canons of history writings: "Whose universals are they?"\(^{39}\)

Access to historical sources is thus ultimately a political issue, because it involves privilege. From a poststructuralist point of view, access to the public sphere is a privilege and a "universal" experience that is clearly Eurocentric, white and male-defined. These constructions are, therefore, the underlying framework of the issue of authenticity and testimonio. This debate is exemplified in the challenges to de Jesus by conservative elites in Brazil and to Menchú by conservative scholars in the U.S.\(^{40}\)

Aside from arguments over exactitude in Menchú's story, and the cultural context for her narrative strategy, there remains a fundamental imbalance in power relations between indigenous subaltern women's testimony and its audience of elite, Northern, postmodernist men. Yet, as Georg M. Gugelberger reminds us,

> Meanwhile, the facts have not gone away: in the course of suppressing Guatemala's guerrilla movement, 150,000 were killed, 150,000 more disappeared, creating 200,000 orphans and 40,000 widows, and more than 1 million exiled or displaced, virtually all of these, as everyone now admits, Maya noncombatants. It was because of Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio that attention was finally drawn to these atrocities, and certainly her book helped significantly to alter the situation.\(^{41}\)

The fact that Menchú's testimonio set off a firestorm because of its inclusion on the reading list of a core requirement course at Stanford University speaks volumes in response to Spivak's query, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

The access achieved by Latin American subalterns to 'first-world' media, and thus to a world audience, indicates the need for a sharper analysis of global/local relations. Latin American women's testimonio highlights the weaknesses of world system theory, with its emphasis on the center/periphery bifurcation. Testimonios are problematic because they are written both for and against dominant cultures. Their critiques of oppression have been largely consumed by educated, affluent North Atlantic populations that share many of the same characteristics of the Latin American elites implicated in testimonios. In the context of globalized culture, the target audience has become a distant and privileged one that, it is hoped, is best positioned to employ liberal solidarity and political pressures in support of indigenous struggles for social justice. For this reason, testimonios have evolved as "collaborative dialogues between activists engaged in a struggle and politically committed or empathetic transcribers/editors."\(^{42}\) It is noteworthy that in this collaboration the interlocuters of testimonio have also been women.

The difference in the North American scholarly reception of Child of the Dark and other testimonios by Latin American women may rest primarily in the fact that Carolina Maria de Jesus testified to the outrages of abject poverty in the favela of Brazil, a social problem viewed by most North Americans as an internal issue, while the testimonio by Rigoberta Menchú addressed state terrorism in Guatemala that has been aided and abetted by the United States, an international crisis that perhaps presents more relevance to North Americans. Academic engagement with testimonio is still constrained by longstanding contests between neoconservatives and New Left scholars that continues to emphasize cold war ideology and issues like insurgency and
center/periphery relations to the exclusion of questions of gender. Meanwhile, citizen activism has played an especially important part in undermining North American support for Latin American interventions since the 1970s, and testimonio has played an important role in informing and motivating that activism.

The promise of postmodern/poststructuralist theory in the historical analysis of Latin American history has not been realized. Poststructuralist history offers the potential for advancing gender analysis and our understanding of testimonio and women's history in Latin America, but at present it is largely employed in abstract, self-reflexive ways that tend to obscure gender, which in turn obscures history. While theoretical arguments about positionality and representational subjectivity can be fascinating, the North American propensity to respond to witness-activist accounts of genocide with either narcissistic arguments about theory or howls of protests against 'political correctness' is disheartening. These political debates are misleading to the extent that they ignore the centrality of gender in testimonio and diminish the historical experiences of women. As Raquel Olea has observed,

Women have been subjects neither of the project of modernity nor of the crisis of this project; historically absent from the pacts of discursive, social, and political power, our recent incursion into the public sphere still situates us in the margin, outside of the spaces valorized by the dominant culture.43

This is due in part to the nature of poststructuralist theory, which in the extreme denies individual agency and can be reductive to the point of absurdity.

The dilemma of poststructuralist theory is that it constitutes both tool and trap. Spivak's thesis that the subaltern cannot speak means that the enmiserated cannot engage in a truly mutual, reciprocal conversation with the privileged within the existing binary system of social hierarchy. George Yúdice argues that “the ‘female element’ in testimonio (or more generally the ‘other’ or marginalized element) does not signify ‘female person’ (or ‘other person’)” and thus “deconstruction only recuperates the other as absence, the is not against which the subject of discourse is.” 44 According to this approach, a female presence simply marks the absence of the male subject, the representation of a marginalized ‘other’ in a female element that lacks personal subjectivity and agency. John Beverley makes a supporting argument regarding the manner of reference to Rigoberta Menchú:

Why does it seem so natural, in our discourse about Rigoberta Menchú, to speak of her as Rigoberta? The use of the first name is appropriate, on the one hand, to address a friend, or, on the other, to address the subaltern. . . . What is at stake in the question of how to address Menchú is the status of the testimonial narrator as a subject in her own right, rather than as someone who exists for us.45

This may explain the persistent reference to female testimonialists by their first names only, a posture of familiarity assumed even by hostile critics. Among supporters, first-name address is often intended to demonstrate solidarity with a compañera, but the fact that even adversarial commentators like Stoll refer casually to Menchú clearly indicates a sign of first-world privilege, as well as male prerogative.

Latin American women's testimonio has made the need for a sharper gender analysis clear, by showing the particular, historical ways in which women have been caught in the local realities of poverty and violence and the ways in which their experiences differ from men’s.
These differing positions between men and women include numerous issues which are constructed socially around gender – disparities in wages, literacy, property rights, citizenship, political access, health care – along with issues of female sexuality and bodily integrity such as sexual assault, domestic violence, prostitution, marriage, reproductive rights, motherhood and family support, and the gendered nature of statist violence in Latin America. All of these areas are central to women’s lived experiences at the most basic level and thus essential to the nature of testimonio.

Despite the early work of some feminist historians – Florencia Mallon, Nancy Saporta Sternbach, Doris Sommers, Jean Franco, and Lynda Marín – in the 1970s, most recent analysis has not considered testimonio within the context of women’s history or gender. Emphasis on the collective, communal identity of women testimonialists has often been the closest thing to scholarly attention to gender, but even then the assumption has often been that this merely constitutes normative, essentialist behavior of Latin American women. It can only be hoped that the usefulness of testimonio has not passed, as some critics have declared, but rather that it is passing into a new phase, one which will include thorough analysis of women’s historical experiences and the gendered relations conveyed in their testimonio.

11. Sternbach, 93.
12. Sternbach, 94.
17. Sternbach, 92.
18. Sternbach, 95.
20. Levine, 189-92, passim.
22. Levine, 14.
23. Levine, 1, 8, 218.
27. Rus, 6.
28. Stoll, xii.
29. Rus, 8-9.
31. Stoll, xiv.
32. Stoll, xv.
42. Yúdice, 17.
44. Yúdice, 22.