

Testimonio: Oral Histories Woman to Woman

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Abstract

This text discusses the genre called "testimonio" and how it has become an important component of the study of Latin America in the American schools. The emphasis falls on three books – *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchu' y así' me nacio' la conciencia*, *Reyita*, and *Si me permiten hablar...* – and the discussion points out the different experiences each of them illustrates.

Key words: testimonio; Rigoberta Menchu; Guatemala; Reyita; Cuba; Domitila Barrios de Chungara; Bolivia; human rights.



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Testimonio is a literary genre that has attracted much attention in academic circles in recent years. As Elizabeth Dore succinctly explains in her introduction to *Reyita*, the testimonial genre has stirred a debate “over issues of authenticity, truth-telling and who is representing whom and for what purposes” (CASTILLO BUENO, 2000, p.12). Postmodernism brought with it a new way to interpret testimonio, in which the “author/editor is a powerful intermediary between the marginalized storyteller and the elite reader, and consequently the person who controlled the text” (DORE, 2000, p.13). Testimonios have become the genre that gives a voice to the previously marginalized by virtue of class, gender or race, and careful readers should be aware of how testimonies are constructed, mediated and distributed. While some testimonios can veer towards the pedantic, moralistic or tendentious, the following three testimonies are excellent and dramatic examples of the genre in which three privileged women document the lives of three “ordinary” women struggling with not only race, class and gender issues, but also economic, patriarchal, and machista life circumstances.

Given that most readers, students, usually, encounter these texts in a literature class, it is important to keep in mind that testimonio is a complex genre which, for some critics, continues to defy definition. The genre is a mixture of biography, oral history, allegory, and the chorus of collective voices. Literary critics argue that what is accounted for in the narrator’s “truth” is something real and true for that person, thus acknowledging its potential for poetic or symbolic truth.

The following three life stories of subaltern Latin American women were

told to women who recognized the value of their life lessons, and who were in a position to record and distribute their accounts to make them public. Each is an example of how oral histories redefine literary conventions. In her own way, each woman challenges the status quo in Guatemala, Cuba and Bolivia. Testimonio thus constitutes a powerful form of resistance in Latin America.



Rigoberta Menchú

“My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony” (MENCHÚ, 1984, p.1). These are the opening words of the most famous, most influential and controversial of the three testimonies reviewed in this essay. Without a doubt, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, translated into English as *Rigoberta Menchú, an Indian Woman of Guatemala* is a gut-wrenching narrative by a young Quiché Indian woman; her story focuses the world’s attention to the atrocities committed during the bloody civil war in Guatemala. The book eventually earned the author the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. This award was doubly significant given the controversy the quincentennial celebration of Columbus’ “discovery” of the New World stirred up during the years leading up to 1992.

The encompassing nature of this testimonio is evident in its continuing opening lines, "I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people...My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans" (Id.). Over a period of a week, Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, a Venezuelan anthropologist, taped Rigoberta's story in Paris in 1982. The result was a mediated testimony, a bittersweet account of the lives, values and beliefs of the Quiché. This testimonio exposed the working conditions of poor Guatemalans working in both urban or agricultural settings, and their subsistence farming on small plots of land when the family was not on the coast performing back-breaking work on fincas. Rigoberta told Burgos-Debray about her family's beliefs and customs, the injustices and hardships her people suffered, and how eventually her consciousness was raised when she joined the PUC. (*Comité de Unidad Campesina – Committee of Peasant Unity*).

The narrative has no smooth transitions; in one chapter Menchú speaks about making tortillas, in another chapter we learn how Mayan women prepare for childbirth, while other chapters document her responses to socialist ideals and the use of the Bible as a revolutionary weapon.

Following the harrowing events she and her family lived through, Menchú became a social activist. There was hope that after the publication of her account, and the awarding of the peace prize, the events in Guatemala would be brought to light and negotiations between the warring factions in Guatemala could continue, thus raising political and social consciousness throughout the world.

Menchú's testimonio later stirred up controversy partly due to the motives

attributed to Burgos-Debray, the wife of Régis Debray, a communist and Castro sympathizer. In 1990, David Stoll's *The Story of All Poor Guatemalans* questioned the veracity of the book. Stoll challenged some of Menchú's claims and labeled her statements as "falsehood, fabrication, fiction, seriously misleading or not true" throughout the book. He claimed the young girl could not possibly have been present at the deaths of her parents nor witnessed their torture; she was not present when her brother died from malnutrition. Despite these claims, Menchú's account was considered to be valid and valuable. It became a global best-seller. Even if all the events in the testimonio did not occur, or even if these events did not necessarily occur in Menchú's family, it was very likely that similar atrocities happened to others. The narrator, critics pointed out, spoke in a collective voice characteristic of her Mayan culture. Most importantly, the book helped to open the eyes of the world to the injustices in Guatemala and exposed the plight of the indigenous communities.

Menchú's testimonio was a success since it brought to light the political injustice, the lack of indigenous rights, and the possible erosion of ethnic traditions in Guatemala. While she reveals something about her lived experience, she holds back at the end, guarding some secrets in order to protect her people and their culture, claiming, "Nevertheless, I'm still keeping my Indian identity a secret. I'm keeping a secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets" (Id., p.247).



Reyita – Maria de los Reyes Castillo Bueno
(1902– 1997)

Reyita

Maria de los Reyes Castillo Bueno (1902-1997) lived in Cuba all her life. Born on “el día de los Reyes” January 6, her story is a biographical narrative lovingly written by her daughter Daisy Rubiera Castillo and first published in Cuba in 1996. Daisy Rubiera is the founder of the Fernando Ortiz African Cultural Centre of Santiago.

Reyita’s life exposes issues of race and color prejudice and marriage in a *machista* Cuba. Reyita was the darkest of four daughters, and the color discrimination leveled at her by her own mother led her to marry a white man. Not herself free of racial discrimination, she married a white man for two reasons. The first was to “adelantar la raza”, that is, to whiten the skin of her offspring so that they would not have to put up with the color prejudice that tainted her own life. Secondly, she felt that black men were a dead end and there was no future in marrying one (CASTILLO BUENO, 2000, p.166). The irony is that fifty years into her marriage, she discovers her marriage was never formally registered. Although Reyita acknowledged her

husband as the head of the family and breadwinner, she was aware that she needed to be economically independent and she worked all her life washing clothes, selling home-cooked food, starting a take-out business and as a respected medicine woman and herbalist, someone her community could count on during tough times. Reyita took care of her own eight children as well as the children of prostitutes. Through her work and thanks to the installment plan, this resourceful woman was able to finance her daughters’ weddings and provide money to bring electricity to the family’s home. She bought a radio, which she claimed changed her life, a refrigerator and a TV, all of which formed part of her “awakening” (Id., p.84).

Reyita’s story begins with her grandmother Tatica’s captivity in Africa and describes how she was put to work cutting sugar cane. She wryly observes that while the white masters on the plantations were prejudiced against the black slaves, it did not prevent them from raping the women. Against her husband’s wishes, Reyita joined the Marcus Garvey movement following his visit to Cuba in 1921. Garvey was a Jamaican leader and the founder of the *United Negro Improvement Association*. Her hopes were dashed when the movement fell apart, but she continued to read the works of José Martí, the history of Cuba, and she was fond of reading poetry and literature.

The book concludes with the matriarch proud of her one hundred and eighteen descendants, all with varying hues of skin and all employed in variety professions. None of her abundant progeny has ever left Cuba, and all of them, she claims, are without racial prejudice. Daisy Rubiera lovingly

documented her mother's story. We see a strong black woman who fights to better the lives of her children and who shares her personal family life as an "ordinary" person who touched many lives. The reader sees Cuba from a female and less political and scholarly point of view than usual as Reyita lives through the racial politics of the Batista dictatorship, the 1959 revolution, in which her son was killed, and Cuba's challenges following the revolution.

The chronological history of the first two chapters gives way to Reyita's personal reminiscences in the following chapters, which shed light on everyday living conditions in Cuba and filters important historical and social events through her point of view. The lives of common women are often overlooked and undervalued, but Reyita's story reminds the reader that intimate, from-the-heart narratives serve to portray the lives of the common people, the glue that holds Cuban society together. Reading her story is like sitting down with a grandmother to hear about her life, a good-natured woman willing to share recipes, love-potions, contraceptive advice and pranks. Reyita's story is a joyous account of community and family life and a portrayal of strength and determination.

Domitila Barrios de Chungara

Barros de Chungara's testimonio was first published in Spanish as *Si me permiten hablar: testimonio de una mujer en las minas de Bolivia*. The title of Barros de Chungara's narrative best describes the purpose of testimonio as a genre that gives a voice to the voiceless. The third sentence in Barros de Chungara's book echoes what Menchú asserts, "What happened to me could have happened to hundreds of people in my country" (BARRIOS DE

CHUNGARA, 1978, p.15). Barros de Chungara told her personal narrative to Brazilian journalist Moema Viezzer in 1978. Her account is the story of the exploitation of the mineworkers by the owners and the political action led by the housewives.

Born in 1937, Domitila is the Bolivian indigenous daughter and the wife of a miner. She had been born in a mining community and it was the only life she had known. In her account she describes

the hardship and abuse she suffered throughout her life. She lost four of her seven children. She participated in a hunger strike designed to gather support and help bring down the dictatorship of Hugo Bánzer. The book is a litany of poverty, woes, and a cycle of suffering that begins with the harsh treatment she received beginning with her father, continuing with her stepmother, her teachers, and her torture when she was



Domitila Barrios de Chungara

jailed for being an activist. In jail she gave birth to a still-born son.

Domitila's story exposed the harsh working conditions of the miners, the lapse safety of the mines, and the mine owner's insistence on putting profits above safety. The narrator's focus, however, is on the wives and compañeras of the workers, and her insistence that women work just as hard and relentlessly in their homes under deplorable conditions. Their liberation and their participation in the struggle are necessary for any change to take place. In "To the Reader" Viezzer describes how she arranged Domitila's numerous interviews, taped material and written correspondence into a three-part book. The first part describes the living and working conditions of the Bolivian miners and the beginnings of an organized workers movement. In the second part we learn about the narrator's harsh existence, with its poverty, physical and mental abuse, and her sheer determination to get through it all in the service of her people. The third part describes the on-going struggle that culminated in the strikes of June and July of 1976.

After she became the leader of the Housewives' Committee of the Siglo XX Mines, she was invited to attend the International Women's Year Tribunal in Mexico City in 1975, where she spoke out and enlightened her audience about her life and struggles at the Siglo XX mine. Barros de Chungara's speech showed how education and political action from women could change conditions. The narrative is steeped in

Marxist rhetoric, yet Domitila refuses to accept that God does not exist. A ceaseless campaigner and an effective spokesperson for the rights of her people, she stood behind the powerless and voiceless, the mine workers, peasants, and women, wanting above all for them to become conscious of their state and how to better it.

Domitila hopes that the audience of her book will be the working people. She hopes to provide an example of how to get out of their predicament of grinding poverty and endless oppression by learning through her life and her example. When Domitila was proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005, she simply stated "I want to leave future generations the only valid inheritance: a free country and social justice."

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