

Female Voice and Feminist Text: *Testimonio* as a Form of Resistance in Latin America

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In this paper, I discuss how key testimonial texts, or testimonio, re-script history, re-define literary conventions and re-inscribe otherwise ignored stories. I argue that Latin American women's testimonio directly challenges the authoritarian powers threatening peace in many countries. I use three case studies: I, Rigoberta Menchú, which denounces military discrimination against indigenous Guatemalans; The Little School, which reveals the Argentinian government's atrocities; and The Inhabited Woman, which criticizes the Nicaraguan government as well as the chauvinism of male revolutionaries. This essay seeks to further recognize testimonio as an empowering and powerful mode of women's resistance at the margins.

Introduction

Latin American women react in a myriad of ways to governmental, military, and patriarchal controls. The stereotype of the self-sacrificing, victimized Latin American woman is all too false in the wake of activist organizations such as The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina. This political group openly protested against the military's (or *junta's*) abduction and torture of their children and family members. The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo also cleverly manipulated their sacred position *as mothers* as a protection against severe governmental persecution. This paper, however, focuses on a more atypical type of political protest: the testimonial literature, or *testimonio*, of Latin American women. In response to the aforementioned atrocities in Argentina, for example, writer Alicia Partnoy took up her pen and wrote the testimonial novel *The Little School*, which describes her experiences as a political prisoner. She then disseminated the book throughout the international community in order to resist the oppressive regime. In this paper, I discuss how key testimonial texts, such as Partnoy's, re-script history, re-define literary conventions and re-inscribe stories which have been either forgotten or ignored. I argue that women's testimonial literature should be taken seriously as a formidable challenge to the authoritarian powers threatening peace in many Latin

American countries. Further, I identify two axes of patriarchy against whom these women authors are fighting: military/governmental control and the chauvinism of male revolutionaries. I will use three case studies to prove the significance of *testimonio*: *I, Rigoberta Menchú* by Rigoberta Menchú, *The Little School* by Alicia Partnoy, and *The Inhabited Woman* by Gioconda Belli.

Testimonial Authors, Political Actors

These three testimonial texts each have a different perspective to offer, and in fact, they represent a continuum from the most factually based *testimonio* to the most “fictional.” Admittedly, the original definition of *testimonio* centered on first-hand accounts which the witnesses then wrote themselves, or dictated to a transcriber. I argue, however, for a much broader understanding of *testimonio* which includes both eyewitness accounts and historical fiction. One of the more powerful attributes of *testimonio* is that, as a genre, it intentionally blurs the lines between fact and fiction; moreover, this academic delineation becomes irrelevant compared to the powerful and candid content within testimonial works.

The first book, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984), is essential to any discussion of *testimonio* because of its fame. In 1992, Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize for literature, and from that moment on her work has been both critically acclaimed and derided. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is a first-person account of the brutality of the Guatemalan government and ruling class toward indigenous Guatemalans. Menchú describes the grueling working conditions at the coffee plantations, where many poor, indigenous people are forced to work in order to scrape together a living. She also depicts the torture and murder of indigenous men and women by the paranoid Guatemalan military, and these scenes are arguably the most commanding scenes in the novel.

Where Menchú is often criticized is in the “accuracy” and format of her book. She did not write *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, but instead dictated her story to anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, which means that Burgos-Debray may have altered or edited Menchú’s words to create a more coherent story. Moreover, Menchú may not have been physically present for events (such as the horrific

burning of indigenous men) which she describes in her book. Nevertheless, Menchú does not claim to have all of the answers herself; she states at the beginning of her book that she is an indigenous woman activist, and that this book is her, and her community's, testimony. According to Menchú, "I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. 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" (1). Menchú remains an important testimonial figure despite criticism from literary scholars such as David Stoll, and her book is invaluable to the study of *testimonio*.

The second example of *testimonio* which I will explore is *The Little School* (1986) by Alicia Partnoy, which portrays the plight of Argentinian political prisoners in the late 1970s. As Partnoy asserts in her book, "[a]lmost 30,000 Argentines 'disappeared' between 1976 and 1979, the most oppressive years of the military rule" (Partnoy 11). During these years, the reactionary Argentinian government abducted and tortured any person they suspected was involved with the Peronist party or other revolutionary movements. The 'disappeared' included mainly college students and young adults, but also extended to middle-aged citizens, mothers, fathers, and even children. On January 12, 1977, anonymous military guards took Alicia Partnoy to a concentration camp. The camp's name was the "The Little School" (*La Escuelita*), meaning that political prisoners were to be "taught a lesson," mainly through violence, torture, and even murder (Partnoy 13-4). Partnoy was eventually released from The Little School and became one of the lucky ones: a survivor. Instead of hiding or going into exile, however, she began to write *The Little School*, a fictionalized yet extremely detailed account of her time in prison. In this book, Partnoy organizes her memories into short chapters of anecdotes, vignettes, and other daily occurrences. As Julia Alvarez writes in the introduction to *The Little School*, "[t]hese are not short stories in the genre of fiction—they are not fanciful and crafted, erudite and inventive—but in the genre of survival tales. Partnoy is a Latin American Scheherazade bearing witness, telling her stories to keep herself alive" (Alvarez 9).

In a similar manner, Gioconda Belli gives a fictionalized version of the National Liberation Movement (or Movimiento) in Nicaragua; though her novel is

technically fictional, it exudes the aura and content of “survival tales” and *testimonio*. *The Inhabited Woman* (1994) is a special instance of *testimonio* because Belli is vague when it comes to details. She does not seek to indict particular military officials, as Partnoy does, so much as she strives to tell the story of the Sandinista struggle against the Nicaraguan dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza. Additionally, *The Inhabited Woman* is different from other testimonial novels in that it attacks the patriarchy of masculinity as well as the dictatorship. Belli takes a particularly gendered stance in her work, describing the double marginality of her main character, Lavinia, who is both a rebel fighter and a woman. Through the character of Lavinia, Belli tells her own story of discrimination, even in the supposedly “liberated” realm of the Movimiento. Through *The Inhabited Woman*, Belli offers a new, gendered, and particularly feminist dimension to the genre of *testimonio*.

***Testimonio* and Latin American Women’s Movements**

To give some historic background, *testimonio* as a form of resistance began as an offshoot of women’s political movements in general. In her essay, “Remembering the Dead: Latin American Women’s Testimonial’ Discourse,” Nancy Saporta Sternbach points out that “[m]ilitary repression and authoritarian rule are no newcomers to the Latin American political scene, but women’s open and direct opposition to them is” (Sternbach 91). Indeed, in the last half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Latin American women have been increasingly fighting against authoritarian regimes and patriarchal control. Annie G. Dandavati, a Latin American scholar, traces Chilean women’s uprisings in particular in her book, *The Women’s Movement and the Transition to Democracy in Chile*. According to Dandavati:

Women struggled to become independent agents involved in determining the direction in which their country would move. They not only protested the political, economic and socio-cultural domination of the military regime, but also sought to transform the

existing situation and offered an alternative vision of society based on democracy, equity and horizontal social relations. (6)

It is important to note that Latin American women are not only reacting to, but transforming political and gender-oriented oppression in their respective countries. Dandavati is quick to highlight, especially, the fact that Latin American women's movements are "more than a reaction to the cultural model of domination and authoritarianism envisaged by the regime"; they involve "a process of creation as well" (8).

This process of creation, which Dandavati applies to the Chilean women's movement, also applies to women's testimonial literature, which is a creation of new for(u)ms of political protest. Women from many Latin American countries "continue to challenge the conventional way of doing politics," emphasizing issues such as "survival, respect of human rights and gender equality" in their writings (Dandavati 9). The testimonial works of authors Menchú, Partnoy, and Belli are just three significant cases of this rebellion, focusing on Guatemala, Argentina, and Nicaragua respectively. These women use their formidable skills as writers to indict authoritarian governments and patriarchal rebel fighters alike.

The way in which *testimonio* has evolved as a form of women's resistance is characteristic of Saskia Weiringa's description of social movements in her book, *Subversive Women: Historical Experiences of Gender and Resistance*. Weiringa declares: "Movements are not static; they should be seen as processes which are modified as they come into contact with everyday life, confronting politics and generally (but not always) the state, in a constant process of reflection, communication and negotiation. They generate certain social processes as they define and redefine themselves" (7). Testimonial literature is a poignant example of Weiringa's theory because it has, as a literary genre and a political movement, modified the way that Latin American women confront politics. The authors of *testimonio* engage in this "process of reflection, communication and negotiation" in their texts, creating a genre in which they as women and as Latin American citizens can voice their discontent.

Further, in the introduction to her book, Weiringa asserts that women's acts of resistance are not only subversive, but "sub-versive," highlighting how, internationally, women are deeply involved "in circumventing, uncoding, and denying the various, distinct, and multi-layered verses in which their subjugation is described, and in replacing them with their own verses (1-2). While Weiringa is discussing Third World women in general, her argument rings especially true for Latin American women writers. These authors, as well as other political activists, are rebelling against patriarchy. What is so key to *testimonio* is the way in which testimonial writers use the written word as their weapon against patriarchy. *Testimonio* is so powerful of a medium because it attacks institutions and governments at a practical *and* a theoretical level.

An Explication of *Testimonio*

Before continuing in my case for *testimonio* as resistance text, I wish to elucidate what categorizes literary works *as* testimonial and what makes these books feminist. *Testimonio*, as a genre, is notoriously fluid and difficult to categorize, because the word "*testimonio*" can describe anything written by a first-person witness who wishes to tell her/his story of trauma. More specifically, John Beverly, an expert on testimonial literature, gives his definition in *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*: "By testimonio I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience" (31). This complex and extremely specific definition shows one attempt to categorize *testimonio* in a way that at least gives it credence as a literary genre. As Marc Zimmerman states in *Literature and Resistance in Guatemala*, however, "[c]learly testimonio is a form in which literary and social considerations become necessarily and overtly intertwined," and because of this intersectionality, *testimonio* defies any easy explanation or categorization (11).

To complicate matters further, the physical format of testimonial text is fluid and includes various shapes. According to Linda J. Craft, author of *Novels of*

Testimony and Resistance from Central America, “[t]he form of testimony may vary, adopting narrative discourses such as autobiography, historical novel, interview, photographs, prison memoirs, diary, chronicle, letter, newspaper article, anthropological or social science documentary; it can be fiction or nonfiction” (Craft 22). The texts that I am choosing to explore are more traditional *testimonios* – in novel form – but even with this commonality the three vary. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is largely autobiographical but also somewhat anthropological, given that her intermediary/translator is Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, an anthropologist. As for *The Little School*, Alicia Partnoy combines conventional prison memoir with fictional short stories, while also giving the reader facts about the concentration camp that could convict her attackers, such as the physical layout of the prison, the names and nicknames of the guards, and the names of other Disappeared people. Lastly, *The Inhabited Woman* is the closest to a fictional novel, but it contains autobiographical elements as well because Gioconda Belli was a rebel fighter and experienced the same double oppression which she depicts in the novel.

With *testimonio*, then, it is apparent how many definitions and formats can cover just one literary genre. Within the three case studies I use, the authors give us various perspectives; what binds them together, however, is their goal of writing these stories: to fight against their oppressors and gain recognition for other disadvantaged women and men in their situation. As Zimmerman writes: “By virtue of its collective representativeness, *testimonio* is, overtly or not, an intertextual dialogue of voices, reproducing but also creatively reordering historical events in a way which impresses as representative and true and which projects a vision of life and society in need of transformation” (Zimmerman 12). The same collectivity, intersectionality and intertextuality that makes *testimonio* difficult to pinpoint is also its greatest strength. It is a genre that can be manipulated in various ways to give voice to the voiceless.

Women in a “Masculine” Genre

Although Latin American women have appropriated *testimonio* for their use as resistance, it was not always such a clearly feminine/feminist category. In her

article, ““The Case For and Case History of Women’s Testimonial Literature in Latin America,” Linda Maier points out that the word *testimonio* itself excludes women completely: “Curiously, the term *testigo* (*witness*) and *testimonio* (*testimony*) derive etymologically from *testes*; furthermore, there is no female form of the Spanish noun so when women are witnesses, they are referred to as *la testigo*” (Maier 3). Given that there is not even a female version of the word “to witness,” it seems unlikely that women would have taken over a literary genre *all about* witnessing, but this is indeed the case. Maier triumphantly goes on to assert that “[i]n consideration of women’s generic exclusion from testimonial discourse, their appreciation of the genre and ascendancy appear all the more noteworthy” (Maier 3).

Margarite Fernández Olmos concurs with Maier’s position in her essay, “Women’s Writing in Latin America: Critical Trends and Priorities.” Olmos argues that in recent years there has arisen a “distinct ‘female ‘voice’ in literature that distinguishes itself from the Latin American patriarchal tradition” (Olmos 139). Furthermore, Isabel Dulfano makes a case for both a female *and* indigenous presence in *testimonio* as she notes that, “[i]n particular, both women and indigenous authors have zealously appropriated *testimonio* as axiomatic for their self-definition” (Dulfano 82). In other words, despite the inherent masculinity and elitism in the definition of testimony and therefore *testimonio*, Latin American women writers, indigenous and non-indigenous, have successfully appropriated the genre in their continued efforts to end patriarchy.

Mobilizing the International Community

There are many purposes for which Latin American women write testimonial literature; one of the more immediate reasons is to gain aid and sympathy from the international community. The governments against which these women are testifying are not only patriarchal and controlling, but also secretive. In the case of Alicia Partnoy, her story as a Disappeared person would never be inscribed into official history, and so she took it upon herself to write *The Little School*. Similarly, Rigoberta Menchú’s experience as an indigenous woman placed her so far into the margins of society that she had to create her own forum for testimony. As Craft

writes, “[o]ne of the primary purposes of this text [*testimonio*] is the denunciation of injustice and the defense of society’s marginalized or excluded [...] by those same people” (Craft 5). Moreover, as a “resistance narrative,” “the testimonial novel has been translated and widely disseminated for political and cultural reasons—often reaching a public far greater outside Latin America than within the region” (Craft 3). Due to the atmosphere of fear in many of the authors’ native countries, and the extreme poverty of many of the citizens, testimonial novels may not receive a lot of overt attention. Once these texts reach the international community, however, they provide evidence for human rights offenses as well as causes for action. Beverly supports this point in his book on *testimonio*, positing that testimonial novels are used primarily “as a way of mobilizing international opinion in favor of an end to the violence” (84). This is exactly how Alicia Partnoy utilized her prison memoirs in *The Little School*, as she presented her book as evidence to the United Nations and at international court hearings about the Disappeared in Argentina. She claims to have written *The Little School* not only for herself, but also for all of the other political prisoners who were tortured, killed, or exiled. “By publishing these stories,” Partnoy says, “I feel those voices will not pass unheard” (18).

Defying Governmental Oppression

Testimonio is not just a text for the international community, for they also serve a purpose in their own countries of origin, covertly if not overtly. Sternbach notes the ripple effect of women telling of their experiences: “Women’s participation in revolutionary struggles witnessing murders of loved ones, suffering disappearances, rapes, tortures, and perhaps most poignantly, women’s specific resistance to military rule, all attest to their own condition [...] which propels them to insure that their story is heard, written, and read” (Sternbach 96, emphasis mine). Authors Belli, Partnoy, and Menchú have undergone all of the above listed atrocities, and yet they continue to resist through the written word, if only to “insure that their story is heard, written, and read.” For these women, anonymity and passivity are not valid reactions. In fact, Sternbach poignantly states that “it is in this trespassing on and usurpation of patriarchal space, undermining the personal and the political,

that we may begin to speak of women's specific testimonial discourse" (Sternbach 96). *Testimonio* deliberately blurs the line between "the personal and the political" to give the women (and men) in the margins a voice.

Challenging Literary Conventions

In discussing *testimonio's* precarious place in literature, particularly in Western traditions, literary critic Zimmerman candidly declares, "[t]estimonio calls into question the very institution of literature as an ideological apparatus of alienation and domination" (Zimmerman 15). Indeed, the Western literary canon has often been used as a check to keep non-white, non-male, non-elite people in their place as Other. Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearny explore this theme of literary Otherness in their article, "Voices for the Voiceless: Testimonial Literature in Latin America." They argue that traditional writing about colonialism has always been "produced at the centers of global power and near the apices of class difference" (Gugelberger and Kearny 4). In fact, the colonizers themselves, or other people of the colonizing race (such as white missionaries), are usually the ones dictating the atrocities that they themselves put into place. In the case of *testimonio*, however, it is "produced by subaltern peoples on the periphery or the margin of the colonial situation. Thus, the margins of empire are now 'writing back' in an overdue attempt to correct the Western canon and its versions of 'truth'" (Gugelberger and Kearny 4).

In a similar vein, Olmos offers this statement: "The *novella testimonio*, or documentary novel, and other nontraditional forms that have surfaced as a result of reevaluation of literary conventions have opened literary participation to the great masses of the illiterate and semiliterate peoples of the region and permitted other female voices repressed, ignored, and forgotten for centuries to be heard" (Olmos 143). What is so key to *testimonio* as resistance narrative is that it does reevaluate the typical form of literature, creating a genre that is *so* encompassing that it is almost unwieldy, and in this way avoids categorization. The testimonial novel is a forum of participation, then, not just for Latin American women, but for all underprivileged peoples to have the power of the written word.

One fault of *testimonio*, perhaps, is that it is not far enough from literary conventions. It is still part of Western literary canons and universities despite its radical nature, and historian Amy Kaminski cautions against the reabsorption of *testimonio* into hegemonic literary discourse. In her essay, “Residual Authority and Gendered Resistance,” Kaminski explains: “Oppositional writing is produced within a context or a series of shifting contexts that make its reception especially problematic, since it is always in danger of being reincorporated by the dominant mode” (Kaminski 108). In other words, books such as *The Little School* are “popular” when the human rights offenses are still occurring, but if and when the problems end, do these books essentially lose their value? Additionally, *testimonio* as “literature” lends itself to giving “credence to a narrative that reinforces traditional power relationships and retell[ing] a familiar story” about women as victims (Kaminski 104). The only way to combat this power struggle, it seems, is to emphasize the “epistemologically privileged standpoint of the oppressed” in *testimonio*, and to value not only its literary attributes but also its cultural richness.

The Subaltern Speaks: Rigoberta Menchú

Rigoberta Menchú is well-known not just for her testimonial novel and her Nobel Peace Prize, but also for the heated debate surrounding her work. Mainly, David Stoll, a literary critic and sociologist, attacked Rigoberta Menchú on counts of “inaccuracy” and authorship (given the fact that her *testimonio* was mediated). Beverly argues, however, that what Stoll is really contesting is Menchú’s *right to speak* as a subaltern person: both a woman and an indigenous Guatemalan. Beverly writes, “[t]he argument between Menchú and Stoll is not so much about what really happened as it is about who has the authority to narrate” (82). In fact, what seems to frighten Western academics most is that “[i]n the process of constructing her narrative and articulating herself as a political icon [...] Menchú is becoming not-subaltern, in the sense that she is functioning as a *subject* of history” (Beverly 85, emphasis mine).

Through her testimonial book, Menchú breaks any stereotypes of her as a passive “native informant” who simply offers information with no structure or agenda. In one of the most horrifying and yet powerful scenes in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, she describes in detail the torture of indigenous Guatemalans, including her brother. In its paranoia about communism, the Guatemalan government had labeled most indigenous peoples as communist and set out to strategically abduct and torture them for “subversive” acts which they never committed. In Rigoberta’s brother’s case, his subversive act was simply not vacating his village when the military ordered him to. For this, he was brutally tortured until he was unrecognizable; furthermore, the army made the villagers watch as they burned each victim alive. This information would have been enough to incite an international uproar, but Menchú takes her narrative to an ideological level as well:

[...] they were Indians, our brothers. And what you think is that Indians are already being killed off by malnutrition, and when our parents can hardly give us enough to live on, and make sacrifices so that we can grow up, then they burn us alive like that. Savagely. I said, this is impossible, and that was precisely the moment for me, personally, when I finally felt firmly convinced that if it’s a sin to kill a human being, how can what the regime does to us not be a sin? (Menchú 180)

In this one, poignant paragraph, Menchú describes all of the oppressions her people face while also taking the word “savage” and using it against her oppressors. She declares that it is not indigenous Guatemalans, but the Guatemalan government, who are truly savage, and she soundly convicts this same government of its “sins.” In this way, Menchú acts as “an active agent of a transformative cultural and political project” (Beverly 93).

Political Prisoner/Activist: Alicia Partnoy

As in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, part of the significance of Partnoy’s *The Little School* resides in the facts and vivid memories she provides as evidence of the

atrocities. Mary Jane Treacy, author of “Double Binds: Latin American Women’s Prison Memories,” abets this point, writing:

Evidence is key, so the narrators [of prison memoirs] provide names of guards and prisoners, copies of their letters, documents from jail, even hand made maps of makeshift jails that were not supposed to exist in their societies. Their memoirs thus blur the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, autobiography and report, as in the case of Partnoy’s stories that later reemerge in the testimony she would give to the Argentine National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons just a few years later. (133)

In testimonial texts such as Partnoy’s, there are “hard facts” but there are also “fictive” sections, such as the chapters in which Partnoy takes on other prisoners’ identities and memories in order to try to tell their stories. Both these fictional and nonfictional elements combine to make Partnoy’s *testimonio* more powerful and riveting than prison memoir or autobiography alone.

Kimberly A. Nance explores Partnoy’s unique narrative and testimonial style in her book, *Can Literature Promote Justice?: Trauma Narrative and Social Action in Latin American Testimonio*. She argues that, by writing traditional facts but also providing other information and memories, Partnoy “explicitly contests official versions of history” (Nance 31). To give one example of this, Partnoy “recounts the fate of friends whom newspaper accounts described as ‘killed in confrontations with the police,’ but who were in reality drugged and taken from the prison to the site of the alleged confrontation” (Nance 32). Here, Partnoy pits her *testimonio* against “official” history, and wins. Her story is, furthermore, proof that not all guerillas, activists, and revolutionaries are men. Often, the stories of revolutionaries are either “gender neutral” or overtly masculine, and “[t]his removal of gender from all references to prisoners obscures the number of women participating in political activities of all sorts, including female members of guerilla groups” (Treacy 130). Partnoy, in response to this stereotypical, constructs her story as a political activist, a woman, a mother, and a wife – in that order.

Patriarchy From All Sides: Gioconda Belli

Belli's *The Inhabited Woman* (or *La mujer habitada*) departs from traditional *testimonio* in that it focuses mainly on one woman's life and the discrimination she faces as a liberal and as a woman. Belli herself came up against this double marginalization as a female member of the National Liberation Party in Nacaragua. In writing *The Inhabited Woman*, then, she transfers her experience onto the main character, Lavinia, in

order to tell her story. In the chapter entitled "The Indian Princess and the High-Heeled Warrior: Gioconda Belli's Revolting Women," Craft argues that, "[a]s a feminist testimonial novel, *La mujer habitada* stands as a striking example of resistance literature, especially challenging long-held societal assumptions about gender and class" (Craft 181). Belli is therefore not just fighting against the government, but against patriarchy in all of its manifestations, including the National Liberation Party itself.

At the beginning of the novel, Lavinia is first introduced to revolution by her lover, Felipe. He involves her in his struggles, but only to a point. When she wishes to join the rebel party herself, he outright refuses, claiming, "You are the shore of my river. If you swam with me, where would the shore be?" (Belli 109) Apparently, Felipe wants to be a revolutionary but also to have his "warrior's repose" in Lavinia. Eventually, Lavinia defies his wishes and becomes a member of the National Liberation Party, and by the end of the novel, she has earned respect as a revolutionary. As Craft asserts, "Lavinia's trajectory in the novel is toward [...] fulfillment; she is a changed woman [...] She has become a revolutionary subject in her own right" (167). Belli's version of the testimonial novel is significant in that she attacks male chauvinism as well as the authoritarian government, concluding the book with the emergence of Lavinia as a female revolutionary. Indeed, "[p]art of her literary achievement is the recording of a heroic struggle by the nation's oppressed; and part of it is the special attention given to the spirit of women who, by will and by necessity, join in the work of liberation" (Craft 179).

Conclusion

This essay has sought to further recognize women's testimonial literature as an empowering and powerful, feminine and feminist, mode of resistance against patriarchy. I have discussed three testimonial texts which truly exemplify the revolutionary nature of *testimonio*: *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, which denounces military repression and discrimination against indigenous Guatemalans; *The Little School*, which reveals the Argentinian government's secret atrocities; and *The Inhabited Woman*, which criticizes the authoritarian Nicaraguan government as well as the chauvinism of male revolutionaries. What these apparently disparate texts have in common is that they attack patriarchy in all of its forms, giving voice to the otherwise voiceless. As Olmos argues, "Clearly, much still remains to be done if we are to appreciate the profound value of this literature for individual women and men, and, more significantly, its potential role in the critical struggles toward a new Latin American reality" (147). This essay is just one attempt to "appreciate the profound value" of *testimonio* – and its women writers.

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