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**The Extraordinary Subaltern: *Testimonio*
Latinoamericano and Representation**

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Soon after Ranajit Guha had founded the field of Subaltern Studies, one of this field's principal academics produced an article that countered the idea that it is possible to study the subaltern. After taking great pains to identify who the 'true' subaltern are¹, Gayatri Spivak, in her widely recognized essay 'Can the subaltern speak?', states that it is impossible for the subaltern to speak without appropriating the dominant language or mode of representation: 'For the "true" subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself [...]'(Spivak 1988: 285). In other words, it is not possible to create a category of the subaltern whose voice can be clearly and unproblematically identified as such without occupying other conceivable speaking positions. Viewed in purest terms, since the subaltern's autonomous voice cannot be heard, it is of no use to study them. This could be interpreted as an aporia within the system of representation. The present essay proposes to address this dilemma using five test cases that reexamine the class of subalterns that have been represented in Latin American *testimonio*.²

This catch twenty-two quandary Spivak described has been the topic of serious debate over the past two decades, and one of those who has grappled with this dilemma is John Beverley. This academic has been able to see how this area of study (which in its initial stages was applied almost exclusively to the Indian Subcontinent) could be used in a Latin American context.³ While Beverley does believe that it is impossible for academics 'to represent ("cognitively map,"

¹ For a more detailed discussion on this topic consult (Spivak 1988: 283-285).

² It is important to mention that Bart Moore-Gilbert has noted one of the key incongruities of this particular essay. Namely, by claiming that the Subaltern cannot speak, Spivak herself is actually speaking on behalf of the subaltern (Moore-Gilbert 2000, 464).

³ See the Latin American Subaltern Studies group founding Statement published in the special edition of *Boundary 2*, 'The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America', ed. John Beverley and José Oviedo Vol. 20, num. 3 Fall 1993, Durham N.C.: Duke University Press

“let speak,” “speak for,” “excavate”) the subaltern’ (Beverley 1999: 40) he does, however, agree with Gustavo Gutiérrez that ‘we can approximate in our work, personal relations, and political practice closer and closer the world of the subaltern [...]’ (Beverley 1999: 40).

One of the means by which Beverley suggests that it is possible to approach the subaltern is through testimonial literature. A recent definition of this genre was presented by George M. Gugelberger in his collection of essays *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Basing his idea on Beverley’s and George Yúdice’s work his essay offers the reader a well defined description⁴ of such a narrative that, in particular makes specific reference to the ‘truth’ content on *testimonio*. He states that this narrative is an ‘authentic narrative’ in which, ‘Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history [...]’ (Gugelberger 1996: 9). In contrast to the definition offered by Gugelberger, in another essay also included in the same volume, Yúdice has offered a more ‘cagey’ view of the truth content of the *testimonio*:

[...] the *testimonialista* gives his or her personal testimony “directly,” addressing a specific interlocutor. As in the works of Elvia Alvarado (1987), Rigoberta Menchú (1983), and Domitila Barrios de Chúngara (1977), that personal story is a shared one with the community to which the testimonialista belongs. The speaker does not speak for or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation that is simultaneously personal and collective. (Gugelberger 1996: 42)

The wording of the previous quote is quite belabored. It appears to be constructed so as to carefully avoid directly stating that the *testimonialista* ‘represents’ - read ‘is the same as’ and or ‘speaks for’ in the same way Elisabeth Burgos-Debray states that Rigoberta Menchú ‘speaks for all the Indians of the American continent’ (Burgos-Debray 1983: xi). After careful examination of several important Latin American testimonial texts along with the forces and motivations behind their creation, the suggested reasons for Yúdice’s attentive wording becomes apparent. The present essay will look at possible explanations as to why the idea of one subaltern’s testimony directly representing a larger group of subalterns cannot be viewed as straightforward. At the same time, this article further discusses the Spivakian aporia described in the introduction by claiming that many of the subaltern represented in several of the key Latin

⁴ By *testimonio* I mean a novel or novella-length narrative in a book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also a real protagonist or witness of the event he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant life experience. *Testimonio* may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following 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” ... 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. (Gugelberger 1996: 9)

American testimonial texts⁵ are not typical subalterns, but rather that they were chosen to share their *testimonio* because they were what this article will call 'exceptional subalterns': possessing qualities that made them stand out to the 'professional writers' who later facilitated the publication of the subaltern's story. First, this article will review two forerunners of the modern Spanish American testimonial literature: Ricardo Pozas' *Juan Pérez Jolote* (1952) and Oscar Lewis' *The Children of Sánchez* (1961), and then three of the fundamental testimonial texts in Latin America: *Biografía de un Cimarrón* (1966) by Miguel Barnet, *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) by Elena Poniatowska, and *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. In this study, the texts themselves along with the authors' and others' comments in addition to the reasons each protagonist's testimony was chosen will be considered and will assist in defining each subaltern as an exceptional figure within their community, and not necessarily representative of it.

Published in the early 1950s, *Juan Pérez Jolote: biografía de un tzotzil* contains the life story of a Chamula Indian from Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas. Like the majority of the testimonial books analyzed in this essay, the author/editor Pozas has provided an explanatory introduction that helps to orient the reader and to understand why he chose to employ this specific *testimonio* for publication. Pozas explains that his book is 'el relato de la vida social de un hombre en quien se refleja la cultura de un grupo indígena' (Pozas 1968: 7). With the hope that the story in question will be a good representative of the culture this anthropologist spent years studying, he describes the subject as a man who is typical of the group in question (except for the fact that he fought in the Mexican Revolution). Pozas then further admits that there are some other small differences between Juan Pérez Jolote and the rest of the Chamula population, whilst still describing his protagonist as characteristic of the indigenous group he studied: 'No es una biografía excepcional; por el contrario, es perfectamente normal dentro de su medio, salvo las causas que obligaron a nuestro biografado a salir de su pueblo' (Pozas 1968: 7).

Though he only makes brief mention of this in the introduction, when he speaks about the reasons why Juan left his hometown in the endnotes of his biography, Pozas explains yet another reason why this character is so unique: Juan's father calls his son vulgar names and abuses him physically. In the endnotes, Pozas explains that the norm amongst the Chamula Indians is to treat children well, provide them with freedom, and show ample amounts of patience when teaching them. Nonetheless, Juan's home life and his fleeing from it are viewed as atypical among the Chamulas: 'El caso de Juan Pérez parece ser una *excepción*, porque tampoco es frecuente que los niños huyan de su casa' (Pozas 1968: 113 *emphasis mine*).

Though he does not openly affirm such in the introduction, Pozas recognizes that his subject's life does have exceptional elements. The physical abuse (which Pozas assures the reader is quite rare) Juan received when young

⁵ Key Latin American testimonial texts as defined in the article 'Testimonial Writing' located in *Encyclopedia of Latin American Studies* ed. Verity Smith 1997 London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.

appears to have convinced him to run away from home at an early age. This mistreatment brought on a series of experiences that marked the first half of his life in an extraordinary way. From the time Juan was a young boy he would attempt to escape his family, approaching strangers and asking them to take him in. This led to him being sold by his host families to others and caused him to live what could be described as a semi-slave like existence. When older, he would go to different parts of southern Mexico as a hired hand. During the time spent away from his community he came in contact with the *ladino*⁶ customs and culture. However, the experience that appears to have had the greatest effect in setting Juan apart from others of this ethnic and cultural origin his people was the time he spent fighting in the Mexican Revolution.

While Juan fought in the Mexican Revolution (first for Carranza, then for Victoriano Huerta, only to later return to Carranza's troops) he was able to travel through Mexico and adapt his life to mainstream Mexican culture to the degree that he had forgotten his native tongue and costumes when he returned to his home town (Pozas 1968: 53-55). By the time he was in early adulthood he had become a person very much removed from his original community. All of these exceptional experiences from the first part of Juan's life (which make his life experiences very distinct – as opposed to typical – from that of his home country) occupy just under one half of the Pozas' biography; however, these adventures could be considered some of the key elements that make *Juan Pérez Jolote* a captivating narrative.

Even when Juan Pérez Jolote decides to return to his family in Chiapas and attempts to live his life as a typical Chamula Indian might, he continues to have experiences that make him an exceptional member of his local community. As Juan grew older he served as *mayor*,⁷ *alférez*, and *mayordomo*.⁸ Later in life, the protagonist is called to be one of the twelve government appointed Spanish teachers who were to teach the local Chamula people Spanish. This assignment was given to him because, due to his experiences as a runaway and a soldier, he was able to speak Mexico's official language, as opposed to the locally spoken Tzotzil. Though Pozas does not go to great pains to convince the reader that the biography he has created represents a typical life lead by a member of the Chamula people the reader is given the impression that Juan Pérez Jolote's life (while quite entertaining, if not fascinating) is anything but typical and that Pozas' introductory comments that affirming the protagonist was typical of the population are simply not accurate.

Though not normally considered in the light of testimonial literature, *The Children of Sánchez* by Oscar Lewis is considered to be one of the works that broke ground for the modern form of the Latin America *testimonio*. Originally compiled and created by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis, this text tells the life story of Jesús Sánchez and his four oldest children Manuel, Roberto, Consuelo,

⁶ In this context and the rest of the times it is used in this article, *ladino* refers to the white and mestiza population (a mix of European and Indigenous) who are also generally characterized by having adopted modern Western values.

⁷ *Mayor*, according to Pozas' study is a type of government official.

⁸ *Alférez* and *Mayordomo* are local government officials who are allowed to sell alcohol.

and Marta⁹. Lewis' purpose in creating this text was to help establish his thesis on what he has called the culture of poverty¹⁰. With his studies Lewis hoped to start a revolution by acquainting: 'the whole reading public – the middle class, and the upper class that wields the power' with how the impoverished citizens of Mexico live (Rigdon 1988: 151). By allowing the poor to speak for themselves in his work, Lewis hoped to deepen our understanding of the disenfranchised, their uniqueness and the wide variety that exists among them. This anthropologist hoped to 'bridge the gap' between 'the very poor and the middle-class personnel – teachers, social workers, doctors, priests, and others' those who Dr. Lewis believed bore the major responsibility for undertaking anti-poverty measures (Rigdon 1988: 151).

However, with regard to selecting good examples of the members of society that lived within what he called the culture of poverty one of his former research assistants, Susan Rigdon, accused Oscar Lewis of choosing extreme examples over representative ones. She believed her former mentor allowed himself to be too-easily persuaded by his impressions, judging him to be a man 'fascinated by extremes in personality and behavior' to such a fault as to distort his data. Dr Rigdon has written that: 'If anthropologists, as he claimed, often had "omitted their most vivid and dynamic" cases in order to identify a general pattern, he himself ignored the general pattern in favor of concentrating on his most vivid and dynamic material' (Rigdon 1988: 125). In support of Susan Rigdon's comments on Oscar Lewis' work, in his introduction for *The Children of Sánchez*, Lewis hints at the fact that the Sánchez family is not exactly the best example of his culture of poverty theory (Lewis 1962: xxvii). However, in a piece of personal correspondence between the social scientist and the editor at his publisher Random House Lewis provides a much clearer justification as to why he chose to focus his work on this specific family which appears to back what Rigdon had previously mentioned:

I find it difficult to come up with a really good sub-title for *The Children of Sánchez*. [...] "The Culture of Poverty" is a catchy phrase ... [but] the Sánchez family is not the best example ... The family of the maternal aunt Guadalupe would have been much better, but by the same token much less expressive. It is interesting that Jesús Sánchez, the father, has worked his way out of the culture of poverty, whereas his children are still in it, more or less. This is just the opposite of what one might have expected [...] (Rigdon 1988: 60)

This last quote clearly demonstrates that even though the Sánchez family was not the best example for supporting Lewis' theory of the culture of poverty (and as seen above, he considered some of the members to have left the culture of poverty completely: i.e. Jesús Sánchez). Jesús and his children used because

⁹ Jesús' life story as presented in this book is considerably shorter than those of his children mentioned in this article.

¹⁰ Oscar Lewis gave one of his most detailed explanations of this theory in his book *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan and New York* published in New York by Random House press in 1966. Alternatively, another Susan Rigdon's book *The Culture Façade* (1988 Chicago: University of Illinois Press) also contains a clear description of Lewis' culture of poverty theory.

they were much better at expressing themselves than others in his study and, thus, their life stories were much more readable material.¹¹ Additionally, the first time Lewis published a text on the Sánchezes in *Five Families*, he also underlined one of the ways in which the this family unit was quite irregular. It describes the Sánchez family as ‘complex’ due to its polygamous characteristics (Jesús had children with four separate wives, some of which he maintained during overlapping periods): ‘Jesús is unusual among lower-class Mexican men because of his strong sense of responsibility [sic] to his various wives and children, none of whom he has abandoned’ (Lewis 1962: 16-17). Again, the complicated structure of the Sánchez family differentiates it from many of its peers as well as the father’s responsible attitude towards it underlines that this family is not representative, but rather, it demonstrates unusual traits. So, it would appear that Lewis’ decision to use this family did not depend on it conforming to general trends within a community it was chosen to represent, but rather due to quite exceptional qualities they possessed.

Both of these two forerunners of the testimonial novel were created by professional anthropologists who tried to use individual life stories in order to offer the reader a clearer image of a broader culture to which each subject belonged. However, Lewis and Pozas also followed the same pattern of publishing the life stories of the more exceptional members of their community in question. Whilst creating narratives that were viewed as interesting to the literate public, these texts could hardly be depicted as exemplifying general trends. What follows in this article will then show how three of Latin America’s key testimonial authors continued with this format when selecting protagonists for their testimonial literature.

La biografía de un cimarrón is considered to be one of the first authentic testimonial novels ever to be written in the Spanish language. Created in the 1960s by the Cuban anthropologist Miguel Barnet, this book contains the life of a former Cuban slave of African origin named Esteban Montejo. Barnet had read Ricardo Pozas’ *Juan Pérez Jolote* and, after doing so, was deeply impressed by this work due to its sociological traits and its artistic merits. At the same time Barnet was working with Montejo on an unrelated project, it occurred to him that he could do something similar to what Ricard Pozas had written: ‘Vi la posibilidad de hacer un libro trazándome la misma ruta de Ricardo Pozas, y no lo pensé dos veces. *Biografía de un cimarrón* surgió así’ (Barnet 1983: 21).¹² However, even before he thought of writing his biography, Barnet had carefully selected his informant for specific reasons.

A mediados de 1963 apareció en la prensa cubana una página dedicada a varios ancianos, mujeres y hombres, que sobrepasaban a los 100 años. El hombre [Montejo], aunque no se reflejaba en sus palabras una inclinación a las supersticiones y a las

¹¹ However, it is interesting to note that Lewis did publish a text that helped to throw light on Guadalupe’s life (the aunt and her family Lewis had mentioned was a better example of his theory) by recording her nephews’ and nieces’ (the children of Sánchez) commentary on her life, death, wake and burial in his book *A Death in the Sánchez Family*.

¹² In addition to Pozas’ work, Barnet was also familiar with Lewis’ publications (Barnet 1983: 61-73) – which would have been quite normal for a Latin American anthropologist of that era.

creencias populares. Su vida era interesante. Contaba aspectos de la esclavitud y de la Guerra de Independencia. Pero lo que más nos impresionó fue su declaración de haber sido esclavo fugitivo, cimarrón, en los montes de Las Villas. (Barnet 1993: 5)

So, as is evident from the statement above, even on a preliminary basis of election, Barnet chose to focus on Esteban Montejo based on the unusual qualities he possessed. After having met with Montejo during various sessions, Barnet describes his subject and his life experiences as 'singular' and 'únicas' and someone whose testimonio 'completaba capítulos completos' of Cuba's history (Barnet 1983: 21). As Barnet explains, Esteban Montejo's life was ideal for expanding on various aspects of Cuba's history. He even goes so far as to claim that this informant fills specific gaps in Cuban nation-forming narrative. Barnet had various goals for his project, and he had chosen Esteban Montejo to specifically fulfill them:

No por azar había escogido a un exesclavo, cimarrón y mambí. Las lagunas, algunas lagunas, para mejor decir, que existían en la historia de Cuba, Esteban las podía llenar por sus avatares insólitos, sus años de soledad, su vida a la intemperie, sus recuerdos de las relaciones étnicas en los barrancones, su conocimiento de la ecología: naturaleza y ambiente de la Isla. Además, Esteban había participado en los hechos más determinantes de ese pueblo de su vida: en la esclavitud con la guataca y los grillos, y en la Guerra de la Independencia con el machete. Había sido también testigo contemplativo de otros sucesos no menos importantes. Toda la vida de Esteban Montejo era atípica, estaba marcada por el signo de un destino insólito. Cuando Graham Greene calificó esata vida de *única*, a nosotros nos pareció un calificativo exacto, que no contenía un elogio banal hacia la obra, sino una observación inteligente. Todos los sujetos no reúnen estas características, así que *Cimarrón*, dentro del género, es un modelo ideal. (Barnet 1983: 21-22)

Barnet, as we can see, was not interested in finding any one person who could represent a typical style of life amongst Cuba's marginal populations and or subcultures. In his work, Barnet had come across a highly unique individual whose life story could fulfill many purposes (historical, cultural and anthropological). He hoped to employ an 'actor legítimo' to add more detail to Cuba's historical memory (Barnet 1983: 23). Barnet describes much more clearly his justifications for choosing his informant than the previous two writers studied in this essay and freely admits that the *testimonialista* in his text is a highly exceptional character within his social group. Such characteristics caught Barnet's attention and convinced him that this particular life story merited circulation to a larger audience though publication. Thus, this particular *testimonio* appears to break with the collective aspect described in Yúdice's definition earlier.

Even though *Biografía de un Cimarrón* is considered by some to be one of the 'original' modern testimonial texts, from the beginning Barnet explained quite transparently that, while this individual does come from the marginal classes of Cuban society, he is extremely exceptional in more that one aspect. If, as an academic in the field of anthropology, he had wanted to make a formal ethnography involving scientific description of a people and their culture (with

specific reference to their particular customs and characteristics) it can be assumed that he would have searched for a more typical example. However, he did not do this in this specific case. Instead, he chose an extraordinary man who could represent much more. More scientifically speaking, he opted for an outlier instead of the medium. Some in the scientific community might frown on using such a subject as a representative; however, Barnet would have known this and, in this case appears to have been working more from the author's point of view, than that of the scientist's. Aside from selecting an incredibly intriguing subject to be the protagonist of his testimonial text, he also incorporates some fictional elements with the purpose of making the book itself more palatable.

In the end, though undeniably the *testimonio* of one single individual, it would be difficult to affirm that Montejo's life is representative of the majority of those who belong to his social group or that his life story is typical of the community to which he belongs. Even though he still formed part of the marginal classes in Cuba, his life events were too extraordinary for him to be considered typical, or even an accurate representation of a larger group.

Soon after Barnet's most famous work in the testimonial literature genre, the Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska published what would be considered her masterpiece: *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969). Much like *Biografía de un cimarrón*, this is also a testimonial novel about a character from the lower echelons of society. The protagonist of Poniatowska's novel, Jesusa Palancares, - who is based on a woman Poniatowska knew in real life - is a woman who was born in Oaxaca, Mexico. Forced to forgo her youth due to the death of her mother and the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution, Palancares becomes a *soldadera*, and later a young widow before she is abandoned in Mexico City. It is there, in the capital, where she later ekes out a living in a variety of unskilled labor positions. Palancares' is a narrative of poverty, struggle, and disheartening misfortune.

When singling out Jesusa Palancares, Poniatowska draws our attention to the fact that it was the manner in which this woman spoke to others that first caught her attention. 'La primera vez que le pedí que me contara su vida (porque la había escuchado hablar en una azotea y me pareció formidable su lenguaje y sobretodo su capacidad de indignación) me respondió: "No tengo campo"' (Poniatowska 1994: 38). Later, on another occasion, Poniatowska expanded on her original justification for wanting to meet Jesusa Palancares explaining that during the late 1960s she overheard Jesusa Palancares speaking with women in Lecumberri prison in a way that made her stand out from the rest (mostly from her 'verbal vigor' [Poniatowska 1985: 157]). This experience motivated the young journalist to seek Jesusa out and she subsequently agreed to Poniatowska's visits and the author affirms that, after some time, she was able to establish a long-lasting friendship with this her informant. One of the fruits of this association is the testimonial novel in question.

Though she does form a part of the large group of the Mexican *campesinos* who come from the provinces to the capital in search of employment and a better life (but who quite often find deception and poverty), Jesusa is

unique from many of these individuals in several ways. Poniatowska has mentioned several of those reasons:

La Jesusa sí es una mujer oprimida, pero no lo es tampoco. Es una mujer oprimida porque viene del nivel más bajo de la sociedad, pero no esta oprimida porque ella se salva sola. Ella tiene carácter y tal fuerza que quizás nosotros seamos más oprimidos que ella en muchas circunstancias. *Ella es un fenómeno aislado y solitario* que reúne características que no son las de la mujer mexicana. [...] Ella no tiene nada que ver con eso. Ella es una mujer que combate desde que tiene nueve o diez años, que toda su vida ha trabajado y ha luchado y *no tiene nada que ver con los patrones clásicos*. (Poniatowska 1985: 158-159 *emphasis mine*)

These unique qualities that this character possessed were precisely what Poniatowska tried to emphasize in the novel that recreated Jesusa's life. In many ways this author was like her contemporary, Barnet, and her predecessors Pozas and Lewis – both of whom she knew personally (and in Lewis' case she had actually spent time working for him), aside from being familiar with their work. Poniatowska also favored the use of a highly unique individual for her testimonial novel. Part of this appears to be due to the fact that this person simply stood out more than average. Similar to the way Esteban Montejo impressed Miguel Barnet for his uniqueness, Jesusa also caught Poniatowska's journalistic instinct, encouraging her to report on her findings.

Finally, of the three original contemporary testimonial texts, the most recently published of these is *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*. Undoubtedly, of the five books analyzed in this essay, this is the most well known internationally. First published in 1983, this book is an account by Rigoberta Menchú, the winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, of her life. Menchú is an indigenous woman from the Guatemalan highlands who, in early adolescence became involved –, as did several members of her family - in the guerrilla warfare between the Guatemalan peasants and the National Army. Later, after going into exile in Mexico following the death of both her parents at the hands of the Guatemalan army, Menchú was given the opportunity to tell her *testimonio* to several audiences in Europe. This is where she met Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, the woman who would facilitate the publication of Menchú's *testimonio*.

For some time, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray had been interested in publishing a testimony by a Guatemalan Mayan woman. When Rigoberta came to Paris (where Burgos was located at the time), the Canadian psychiatrist Marie Tremblay was able to put Burgos in contact with Arturo Taracena, Menchú's contact while in Paris.¹³ They later arranged a meeting between the three. Taracena explains that the reason Menchú had been selected to join the European tour was 'because of her great ability to express herself' (Acetiuno

¹³ At that time, Arturo Taracena was a doctoral student in history at École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Currently a writer, Taracena has been the European representative of the URNG (Guatemalan National Revolution Unjitary) and an adviser to Rigoberta Menchú for several years.

2001: 82). This same quality also was what helped her *testimonio* to become a book. Taracena explains:

Did you conceive of the interview as a book from the very start?

No, it was just a regular interview, and, as Elisabeth herself says, the idea of the book came up afterward. It was when we were reviewing the twenty-six hours of tape,¹⁴ where we heard this voice with such strength and narrative capacity, that we realized that there was enough rich material for a book. That is to say that, beyond the testimony itself, there was a profound literary quality to Rigoberta Menchú's voice. (Acetiuno 2001: 84)

So, according to the editors of Menchú's testimony, one of the reasons it was first selected for the European tour was because of Rigoberta's exceptional ability to express herself. In addition, it was Menchú's extraordinary narrative capacity that convinced her listeners to make a book out of her *testimonio*. However, when comparing Burgos' description of Rigoberta Menchú's personal qualities and her justification as to why she was chosen to be the protagonist of the book Burgos created, Burgos deemphasized this aspect.

There are several possible explanations for this. One of them is that unlike the authors of the texts analyzed above, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray was not in contact with her subject for a long period of time. The twenty-five hours of recorded interview¹⁵ between Burgos and Menchú used as the primary material for the book took place in less than a week's time. In the case of the other authors mentioned, the relationship between author and interviewee involved months and even years of contact. It would be fair to say that Burgos simply had less personal interaction and involvement with Rigoberta than was the case with the other four authors listed in this study. Another key issue is that, whereas authors such as Lewis sought out their subjects as part of a research project, Burgos was more of a passive agent. In a very real sense, Elisabeth did not select Menchú, but rather Menchú was chosen for her. Burgos simply became the translator/editor of a text that quite literally came knocking on her door.

There has been no shortage of writers claiming that Rigoberta Menchú is anything but a typical subaltern. One individual who has most clearly pointed to Menchú's exceptional qualities is also one of her fiercest opponents: David Stoll. In *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999) Stoll goes to great lengths to prove that one of the reasons Menchú is exceptional is because, from an early age, she was repeatedly sent out of her village to gain a formal education. This experience would not only have allowed her to come into contact with *ladino* culture, but it would also have helped her to be able to tell her story later on in Paris by supplying her with a greater fluency in Spanish and a better

¹⁴ The number of hours of recording between Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray varies between different sources. In this case Taracena says there were twenty-six. Burgos says in her introduction that they were twenty-five (Burgos-Debray 1984: 20)

¹⁵ Note that for this article the number of hours originally quoted by Burgos has been used, although David Stoll in his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999, Oxford: Westview Press) asserts that there were only eighteen and a half hours of recordings.

grasp of concepts such as class, ethnicity, culture, identity, and revolution.¹⁶ Stoll has shared one of the claims made by Menchú's siblings that shows she was a step above those who had not left her village for and education:

Her talking was no longer that of ours. She could speak Spanish well... She admonished us to speak correctly. She always shared what she was studying there... We were always taking it in, in case there was some court or lawsuit to attend. She always explained things to us. When she left, we were always sad. (Stoll 1999: 163)

Though Stoll tends to focus on what Menchú could not have done - i.e. witness her brother's death - his study also underlines the ways in which she was different from the other of members of her community, and for that reason is not a good example of a so-called 'typical' woman from her community.

During the course of this article, the reader had the opportunity to analyze the selection criteria used in the case of the protagonists of five key Latin American testimonial narratives. This process has revealed that in every instance, though often meant to represent a group (i.e. the Chamula Indians, the Culture of Poverty, the Guatemalan highlanders), the main characters have been selected because of their exceptional characteristics, rather than because of their being typical members of their community. Their attributes that make them stand out appear to have helped the editor/translator/author to take note of and foment interest in their *testimonio* and decide to publish their final account instead of others. As we have seen, given that each of the subalterns chosen were in some sense exceptional, it can be argued that each protagonist in question is, therefore, in effect a poor representative of his or her people. Simply stated, many of the testimonial accounts the informants have presented are not a 'personal story [that] is a shared one with the population to which the *testimonialista* belongs' (Gugelberger 1996: 42). However, this paper is not arguing that these *testimonios* should be discounted, but that they should simply be recognized as one given by a highly unique member of their community.

In one sense, this line of reasoning adds further weight to Spivak's argument outlined at the outset of this article. Mainly because if it holds true that only the exceptional subaltern is portrayed in the *testimonios*, then - strictly speaking - the truly subaltern is not represented and its voice continues unheard. Nevertheless, at the same time, if books are created that can faithfully represent the exceptional subaltern then, according to Beverley, Subaltern Studies is succeeding because it is able to take the reader one step closer to the margins of subalternity. So, this does not appear to be an entirely either/or situation. However, perhaps a better question would be to ask: Does the ability to have a voice (a printed voice) have so much to do with certain levels of marginalization or non-marginalization as is does with being interesting? Spivak's basic argument in her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', has been restated in the

¹⁶ In his book *Rigoberta Menchú...*, Stoll emphasizes that from the time *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* first appeared skeptics have wondered 'how an unschooled peasant, illiterate and monolingual until a few years before, could be so fluent in concepts like class, ethnicity, culture, identity, and revolution' (Stoll 1999: xiii).

following way: 'If the subaltern could speak – that is, speak in a way that really mattered to us, that we would feel compelled to listen to, then it would no be subaltern' (Beverley 2001: 222). It appears that, in these five test cases, the fact that each one of the subjects has led intriguing, extraordinary lives or possessed interesting or unusual personal attributes has made their *testimonio* captivating enough to merit publication. It was not the typical nature of their existence that attracted their authors'/editors' attention. Nonetheless, notwithstanding their interesting lives, each one of the protagonists (with the possible exception of Rigoberta Menchú) has continued or continues to remain confined to their subaltern community. Elena Poniatowska emphasizes this point:

Jesusa tenía razón. Yo a ella le saqué raja, como Lewis se las sacó a los Sánchez. La vida de los Sánchez no cambió para nada; no les fue ni mejor ni peor. Lewis y yo ganamos dinero con nuestros libros sobre los mexicanos que viven en vecindades. Lewis siguió llevando su aséptica vida de antropólogo norteamericano envuelto en desinfectantes y agua purificada y ni mi vida actual ni la pasada tienen que ver con la Jesusa. (Poniatowska 1994: 51)

That said, one final question remains. Supposing a testimonial text was to be created about a typical subaltern character, could such a narrative get into print? Would this life story be classified as a *testimonio*, since it would deal with subalternity, or would it simply be classified as a dull (auto?) biography? And perhaps even more importantly, would anyone read it, or would it be, as Miguel Barnet has said: 'un ladrillo que nadie lee' (Skłodowska 1991: 20)? If that were the case, what would its contribution to Subaltern Studies be?

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