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Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing

Gilmore, Leigh, and Elizabeth Marshall. Fordham University Press, 2019.

Nicole Stamant

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BOOK REVIEW

Gilmore, Leigh, and Elizabeth Marshall. *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing*. Fordham University Press, 2019.

At the beginning of the Acknowledgments to *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing*, authors Leigh Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall note that they published the article that provided the groundwork for this book in 2010 and, in the intervening years, honed and “developed [their] interest in childhood, self-representation, visual culture, and trauma” via discussions and conversations with colleagues across the fields of life writing, feminist studies, and children’s literature (113). Their considered, extended, cross-disciplinary collaboration is on full display in *Witnessing Girlhood*, a slim yet excellent analysis of how girlhood is figured, reclaimed, and accompanied across time and space and form. *Witnessing Girlhood* traces a “genealogy of the child’s centrality to struggles for justice, especially antiracist, feminist, labor, and human rights movements, and the significance within these movements of life writing as a means to spur activism through the representation of childhood” (5). As such, it theorizes the child as witness – ethical and, at times, collective – and thereby as testimonial figure. They argue that, across the texts they consider, the child witness represents and documents experience to “leverage the affective power of childhood to connect with diverse audiences” (5).

Their initial article, “Girls in Crisis: Rescue and Transnational Feminist Autobiographical Resistance,” published in *Feminist Studies*, focuses on three well-known and much-taught works: Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Rigoberta Menchú’s *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*. This article provides the foundation for *Witnessing Girlhood*’s framework and its first chapter, “Girls in Crisis: Feminist Resistance in Life Writing by Women of Color.” This chapter distills the overall premise of *Witnessing Girlhood*: that examining how girls have been represented, historically and transnationally, in life writing allows Gilmore and Marshall to “chart an understudied genealogy of feminist critique in autobiographical forms” (14). Such an approach prioritizes the autobiographers’ engagement with various modes of connection with readers, among them an examination of citizenship, a deployment of “the child as capable of bearing witness” (14), and of the rhetorical power of sympathy to move readers beyond sentiment to political activism. Gilmore and Marshall thus find these works as examples “of what Saidiya Hartman calls ‘resignification’: a generative practice through which women of color exercise symbolic power and through centering the female body not only for evidence of violence and social death, but for signs of life” (15). The responsibility of the reader, Gilmore and Marshall argue, is thereby an ethical one: because “girlhood is a testimonial site” (37), readers across historical contexts have a responsibility to bear witness instead of engaging with these texts through a white savior lens.

They then extend their initial focus to consider other ways in which girlhood functions as testimonial site. The second chapter, “Gender Pessimism and Survivor Storytelling in the Memoir Boom,” focuses on two other well-known literary memoirs – Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* and Lucy Grealy’s *Autobiography of a Face* – alongside Hannah Gadsby’s autobiographical, solo stand-up performance, *Hannah Gadsby: Nanette*. When examined together, Gilmore and Marshall note that, in this trio of works,

the adult writers consider childhood trauma to “resituate trauma theory’s claim of unrepresentability in the interval of interpretation where doubt about women’s credibility and value lurks” (39). In so doing, they locate these texts in the larger discussion in the 1980s and 1990s concerning what they describe as gender pessimism and the memoir boom around the turn of the millennium. Gilmore and Marshall consider how the discipline of femininity – the production of “docile gendered subjects” which “confine women to expectations about their subordinate role” in ways that make women believe these desires are their own (39) – frames girls’ adolescence as crisis. Gilmore and Marshall argue that gender pessimism as a structure allows girls to retain power insofar as it aligns with “girl power,” yet the girls understand that, socially, under the domain of gender pessimism, their worth is less than that of boys; girls also, then, recognize that when they reach adulthood, their worth as women will remain less than that of men. This chapter examines and links three works by white women writers about trauma they experienced in girlhood through gender pessimism, posing the authors’ challenge to the unrepresentability of trauma in their effort “to shift the burden of being the target of a diagnosis that pathologizes gender and anger and place it, instead, onto the structures that sustain white male privilege” (41). Gilmore and Marshall convincingly demonstrate how these works provide counternarratives to conventional understandings of trauma and theories about traumatic experiences, particularly when examined in the context of gender and childhood, to underscore the absence of witnesses who will believe their testimony and bear ethical witness to their experiences. As they argue in the first chapter, the adult life writers accompany the girlhood subjects as a way to protect them, to provide ethical recognition of them, and to validate their experiences.

Continuing to analyze recognition and the visual elements associated with it, along with the politics of looking, chapters three and four focus on graphic narrative and picture books, respectively, to argue that life writing about sexual and gender-based violence, particularly in texts that feature images, both allow for survivor experience and perspective to take the fore and drive ethical witnesses to action. Chapter 3, “Visualizing Sexual Violence and Feminist Child Witness,” theorizes how autobiographics, to use Gilmore’s word, in Phoebe Gloeckner’s *A Child’s Life and Other Stories* and Una’s *Becoming Unbecoming*, “materialize the social fact of girlhood and rape” and “create perspective through scale and represent different temporalities in which ethical witness rather than voyeuristic or detached looking can arise” (64). Gloeckner and Una, Gilmore and Marshall argue, exemplify how the child witness can amplify the visibility of sexual and gender-based violence as they refuse readerly and/or societal complacency in the face of rape culture (63–4). “Images are not neutral,” they explain; instead, they “are productive rather than reflective – they create ways of seeing and feeling Indeed, feminist self-representations of sexual violence disturb those forms of visual access” (64). Gloeckner, they point out, insists on visually representing sexual violence and demands readers consider gendered practices of looking and seeing, while Una’s work brings together her own experiences as a girl of multiple sexual violations and the history of the Yorkshire Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe (67, 75). Lack of access to justice and testimony are central elements within rape culture, and *Witnessing Girlhood* demonstrates how Una and Gloeckner interrupt the scripts of rape as they visualize witness as a means to demonstrate the pervasiveness of violence against women and girls. Gilmore and Marshall pay particular attention to a few elements of graphic narrative – “scale and temporality, and a use of the gutter” (64) – to illustrate how Gloeckner, for example, “reclaim[s]” images and “visualize[s] the violence from the girl’s point of view” (67), while they see Una’s child witness asking the reader to consider the “brutality of men” (75). Productively synthesizing and drawing on graphic narrative scholarship, Gilmore

and Marshall closely consider these works and their mode to “suggest that comics offers an alternative jurisdiction – or forum of judgment – convened by the graphics artist in book form” in which “sexual violence will be visualized as injury, men will be drawn as both everyday actors and as sexually violent and predatory, and readers will be required to see the violence from the artist’s point of view” (85). Gloeckner and Una thereby, Gilmore and Marshall argue, insist that readers engage in a practice of looking that is ethical, feminist, and centers the child witness.

The fourth chapter, “Teaching Dissent through Picture Books: Girlhood Activism and Graphic Life Writing for the Child,” similarly considers how word and image work to require different practices of looking and recognition for readers. Here, Gilmore and Marshall look to picture books and children’s literature to “extend the tradition of using the child to bear witness to collective violence” (86). To that end, in this chapter they consider Junko Morimoto’s graphic memoir, *My Hiroshima*, and Michelle Markel’s *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers’ Strike of 1909*, which was illustrated by Melissa Sweet, writing that children’s literature:

[O]ffer[s] instructional scenes for ethical witness by repicturing history through the perspective of the child witness, reclaiming visual images of violence through memory, and crafting graphic representations of child activism and resistance. In so doing, they challenge historical narratives and alter ‘our habits of looking.’ (87)

Picture books rely on a dual audience, Gilmore and Marshall remind us: that of the child, the text’s primary and ostensible first audience, and of the adult who will purchase or teach the book. This figuration of the child is especially interesting in *Witnessing Girlhood*; writing about Morimoto’s book, for example, they explain that she “draws on contradictory understandings of the child as a reliable witness, a vulnerable subject who should be protected from harm and an ethical subject upon which to attach hope for a peaceful future” (89). Their analysis expands and makes more capacious their consideration of child witnesses, compelling readers to consider how picture books can, alongside the other works they examine across their inquiry, provide testimony for trauma and allow for “fresh ways of looking and witnessing” (89).

The child witness, figure of girlhood and site of testimony, as Gilmore and Marshall clearly point to her across these works and convincingly trace her across transnational life writing, is not new, but she has been underexamined. The genealogy established by *Witnessing Girlhood* runs from the nineteenth century into the twenty-first and includes texts that are both widely known and many that are not. Indeed, their epilogue, “Twenty-First-Century Formations: Child Witness, Trans Life Writing, and Futurity,” exemplifies their approach with its focus on Janet Mock’s first autobiography, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love and So Much More*, and Gayle Salamon’s *The Life and Death of Latisha King: A Critical Phenomenology of Transphobia* in order to demonstrate the variable ways in which some children are denied – by the state, by the public, by legal systems, etc. – the status of child. Focusing explicitly on trans lives and life writing in this epilogue, Gilmore and Marshall demonstrate that there are many ways of accompanying a trans child in terms of self-representation, whether, as Salamon does, through an analysis of childhood’s connections to Latisha King’s murder and the trial that follows, or, as Mock does, in her memoir of trans girlhood. “What is the time of trans childhood?” Gilmore and Marshall ask:


Is it contemporaneous with childhood? Does it begin with the awareness of difference from assigned gender, with the dawning of a consciousness of gender, of the sense of dissonance between one’s becoming and one’s world? Does it arise from the articulation of ‘I am’? And also, or equally, of ‘I am not’? (106–7)

Questions such as these undergird and lend urgency to the project of *Witnessing Girlhood*, as Gilmore and Marshall repeatedly demand that readers pay attention to the figure of the child witness and the testimony she provides. “Readers navigate these three domains – the life experience, the process of creating the text, and the formal elements of the text – and grasp the identity and story of the subject in a single gesture *as if* they were one,” Gilmore and Marshall explain. “Life writing exceeds previous scholarly framings of it to offer new temporalities of witness and of life” (110, italics original).

Gilmore and Marshall write that *Witnessing Girlhood* is not meant in an effort to denote a new or discrete genre: doing so, they suggest, undermines the possibilities for how the writers disrupt of extant narratives and scripts, and how the writers see themselves “challenging, extending, or revising” certain kinds of traditions (108). Further, the result of the interrogative force of these texts means that they are less likely to “become immured within a museum of static forms” (108). The works considered here are all testimonial, self-representational, and forcefully demonstrate that – across genre or form – new connections and modes of witness can be generated in the service of a call to action. Such capaciousness of inquiry is one of the great strengths of this work, as life writing scholarship contains the flexibility to read works through, across, and against the warp and weft of how women write about their lives, for particular audiences, in particular ways, at particular times. *Witnessing Girlhood*’s cross-genre, feminist, interdisciplinary, and rigorous analysis will invigorate scholars, teachers, and readers to create “new alliances, intimacies, and proximities” (109). What’s more, in repeatedly articulating the stakes that such testimony and bearing witness can afford survivors across national and temporal divides, they enact the kind of accompaniment alongside the girls who testify that they theorize, underscoring that making space for the survivor signature and self-representational gesture itself enacts ethical witness and encourages readers to act.

Works cited

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Nicole Stamant
Agnes Scott College, Decatur
 nstamant@agnesscott.edu

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