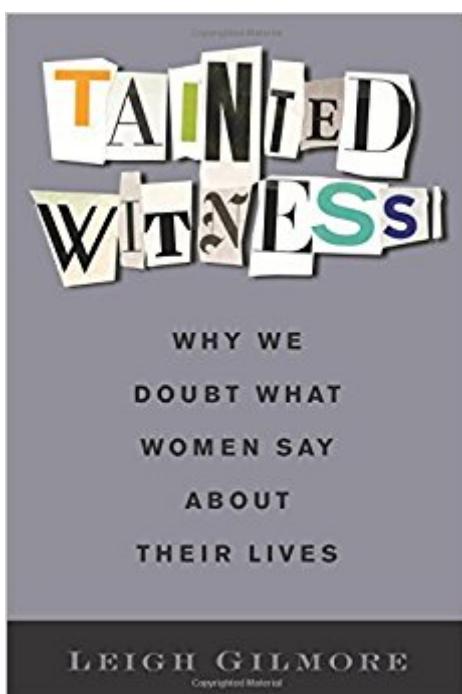


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# **Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives (Gender And Culture Series)**



## Synopsis

In 1991, Anita Hill's testimony during Clarence Thomas's Senate confirmation hearing brought the problem of sexual harassment to a public audience. Although widely believed by women, Hill was defamed by conservatives and Thomas was confirmed to the Supreme Court. The tainting of Hill and her testimony is part of a larger social history in which women find themselves caught up in a system that refuses to believe what they say. Hill's experience shows how a tainted witness is not who someone is, but what someone can become. Why are women so often considered unreliable witnesses to their own experiences? How are women discredited in legal courts and in courts of public opinion? Why is women's testimony so often mired in controversies fueled by histories of slavery and colonialism? How do new feminist witnesses enter testimonial networks and disrupt doubt? *Tainted Witness* examines how gender, race, and doubt stick to women witnesses as their testimony circulates in search of an adequate witness. Judgment falls unequally upon women who bear witness, as well-known conflicts about testimonial authority in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries reveal. Women's testimonial accounts demonstrate both the symbolic potency of women's bodies and speech in the public sphere and the relative lack of institutional security and control to which they can lay claim. Each testimonial act follows in the wake of a long and invidious association of race and gender with lying that can be found to this day within legal courts and everyday practices of judgment, defining these locations as willfully unknowing and hostile to complex accounts of harm. Bringing together feminist, literary, and legal frameworks, Leigh Gilmore provides provocative readings of what happens when women's testimony is discredited. She demonstrates how testimony crosses jurisdictions, publics, and the unsteady line between truth and fiction in search of justice.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In *The Washington Post*, Jill Filipovic believes that "Tainted Witness" is a timely and necessary defense of the women whose voices are so often drowned out or shouted down: "Tainted Witness" arrives at the right time, at the front end of a rapidly building anti-feminist backlash. The ease with which so many Americans disregard or disbelieve women's testimony was on clear display in November, when millions voted for Trump despite the accusations against him and his own claim, caught on video, that he had sexually assaulted women. This book provides a crucial feminist critique of the impossible and ever-shifting standards to which women who offer life testimony are held, along with guidance on how to navigate a path forward....These are crucial observations and excellent rebuttals to the faux legalism that so often dominates the public discourse around high-profile sexual assault cases. We are entering an era when malevolent sexism and entrenched mistrust in women are not only tacitly approved but actively modeled by the man in the Oval Office, and when many of our most valued institutions and even the very concept of truth are under fire. Not in recent memory have the ideas Gilmore elucidates been so necessary, which is why I wish her work was more accessible to a wider audience. Still, this is a sharp work of feminist scholarship, unflinching in its insistence that women's testimony about our own lives is a potent and often threatening force undercut by those who accurately assess its power. In a country soon to be led by a very loud man who ran a campaign of aggrieved masculinity, "Tainted Witness" is a timely and necessary defense of the women whose voices are so often drowned out or shouted down.

In *The Times Higher Education*, Laura Frost gave an excellent close look at *Tainted Witness*, which was named the THE Book of the Week: The tautological observation that women are thought to be untrustworthy because they are women invites speculation about its genesis. While a definitive answer lies outside the scope of *Tainted Witness*, Gilmore is especially astute when she shows how "bodies and story move in a choreography of testimony". For example: "The instant Anita Hill saw a barrage of flashbulbs erupt the first time she altered position in her seat, she knew that in photographs of her testimony, her body could be made to tell a story that would compromise her." These and other somatic moments in *Tainted Witness* show how profoundly female embodiment influences the reception of women's words. If harassment and assault are a means of denigrating women's power, might the charge of fabrication - in the sense of deceit - conceal

an anxiety about fabrication in the sense of making or creating, and perhaps the most fundamental power of reproduction? Now that America has elected as its president a man who denigrates women and their bodies, who thinks women who exercise their reproductive rights should be "punished" and who spouts xenophobic and racist views, Gilmore's insights are more pressing than ever. *Tainted Witness* is an important and timely book. If ever we needed evidence that the work of feminism is not yet done, this is it. In the *Boston Globe*, Katie Tuttle quotes Leigh Gilmore on the timeliness of *Tainted Witness*: "My hope in the book," she said, "is if we can become familiar with these patterns for undermining women's testimony, and undermining women's credibility, then I think we can begin to anticipate where and how these attacks will take place and maybe we can try to stay a step ahead of them." As we face the results of an election that included examples of this dynamic (Hillary Clinton, Gilmore said, "has been a tainted witness for almost her entire career"), we stand at a moment of possible change. "On one hand, this seems like the era of welcome for women's testimony. We seem to be hearing more stories from more places around the world from women," she said. "But at the same time, the mechanisms for tainting women's witness are swifter and more effective than ever." In this moving and transformative text, Leigh Gilmore explores the different ways that women's testimonies are made incredible. With patience and care, Gilmore explores how testimonies circulate, how they keep open histories that have yet to be resolved, and how testimonies become tainted because of who as well as what they point to. This insightful book gives testimony a feminist hearing (Sara Ahmed, author of *Living a Feminist Life and Willful Subjects*) *Tainted Witness* is an important, relevant, often brilliant book. It further establishes Leigh Gilmore as one of the best critics writing today on the intersection of feminism and life narrative. (Hillary Chute, author of *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* and *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*) *Tainted Witness* displays, once more, Leigh Gilmore's remarkable ability to hone in on the most interesting, provocative, or instructive moments in any historical situation or text, and then say memorable and highly useful things about them. (Craig Howes, director of the Center for Biographical Research and professor of English, University of Hawai'i at Manoa) Rarely does an academic book address its moment so precisely as *Tainted Witness*.... An important and timely book. If ever we needed evidence that the work of feminism is not yet done, this is it. (Times Higher Education) *Tainted Witness* doesn't just look at what's broken about how we view women's testimony. It also examines how women can work toward "distributing doubt" and ultimately arrive at true justice, making this essential reading for women living under a president who publicly professed sexual assault and faced no consequences. (Rumpus) *Tainted Witness* is a timely and necessary defense of the

women whose voices are so often drowned out or shouted on. (Washington Post)

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I picked up Tainted Witness to help me understand the 2016 elections after reading a piece by the author in The Conversation about Hillary Clinton. The first chapter on Anita Hill brought back a lot of memories and offered a new entry point for thinking about how women's life stories (whether in memoir or legal testimony, etc) are used and misused. Glad to see an academic book take on an issue so important to feminism today.

It had a lot of good information but was hard to follow. The theme was not emphasized enough in the conclusion.

Provocative and timely. Fresh prose and insightful analysis. A must read!!

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