

# The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy

Arturo Arias, Editor

With a Response by David Stoll



*University of Minnesota Press*  
*Minneapolis*  
*London*

# Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Abbreviations	xi
I	
Background	
Rigoberta Menchú's History within the Guatemalan Context	3
<i>Arturo Arias</i>	
<i>I. Rigoberta Menchú and the "Culture Wars"</i>	29
<i>Mary Louise Pratt</i>	
II	
Documents: The Public Speaks	
Tarnished Laureate	58
<i>Larry Rohrer</i>	
Stoll: "I Don't Seek to Destroy Menchú"	66
<i>Interview by Dina Fernández García</i>	
About Rigoberta's Lies	70
<i>Daniilo Rodríguez</i>	
Lies by the Nobel Prize Winner	73
<i>Jorge Palmieri</i>	
Her	76
<i>Rosa Montero</i>	
The Pitiful Lies of Rigoberta Menchú	78
<i>Octavio Martí</i>	
Arturo Taracena Breaks His Silence	82
<i>Interview by Luis Aceituno</i>	

Copyright 2001 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota

Copyright and permission information for previously published works included in this book is found on pages 417-18.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by the University of Minnesota Press  
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290  
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520  
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Rigoberta Menchú controversy / Arturo Arias, editor; with a response by David Stoll.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8166-3625-7 (HC : acid-free paper) — ISBN 0-8166-3626-5 (PB : acid-free paper)

1. Menchú, Rigoberta. Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia. 2. Menchú, Rigoberta. 3. Stoll, David, Rigoberta Menchú and the story of all poor Guatemalans. 4. Quiché women — Biography. 5. Mayas — Guatemala — Government relations. 6. Women human rights workers — Guatemala — Biography. 7. Mayas — Civil rights.

8. Arias, Arturo, 1950— II. Stoll, David, 1952—

F1465.2.Q5 M387 2001

972.81004'97415—dc21

00-012083

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

- Rigoberta 95  
*Manuel Vásquez Montalbán*
- About David Stoll's Book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* 97  
*Jorge Skinner-Kléé*
- Let's Shoot Rigoberta 99  
*Eduardo Galeano*
- Rigoberta Menchú Tum: The Truth That Challenges the Future 103  
*The Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation*
- Against Gerardi and Against Rigoberta, Attacks Are Continually Made to Make Them Lose Some of Their Luster 107  
*Margarita Carrera*
- Rigoberta Menchú: Those Who Attack Me Humiliate the Victims 109  
*Interview by Juan Jesús Aznárez*
- David Stoll Breaks the Silence 118  
*David Stoll*
- The Anthropologist with the Old Hat 121  
*Dante Liano*
- The National Council of Mayan Education and Its Twenty-two Member Organizations Publicly Declare 125  
*A Hamburger in Rigoberta's Black Beans* 127  
*Carolina Escobar Sarti*
- III
- Responses and Implications
- Why Write an Exposé of Rigoberta Menchú? 141  
*Carol A. Smith*
- Textual Truth, Historical Truth, and Media Truth: Everybody Speaks about the Menchús 156  
*Claudia Ferman*
- The Primacy of Larger Truths: Rigoberta Menchú and the Tradition of Native Testimony in Guatemala 171  
*W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz*
- Telling Truths: Taking David Stoll and the Rigoberta Menchú Exposé Seriously 198  
*Kay B. Warren*
- What Happens When the Subaltern Speaks: Rigoberta Menchú, Multiculturalism, and the Presumption of Equal Worth 219  
*John Beverley*
- Las Casas's Lies and Other Language Games 237  
*Doris Sommer*
- The Poetics of Remembering, the Politics of Forgetting: Rereading *J. Rigoberta Menchú* 251  
*Elzbieta Sklodowska*
- Whose Truth? Iconicity and Accuracy in the World of Testimonial Literature 270  
*Daphne Patai*
- Menchú Tales and Maya Social Landscapes: The Silencing of Words and Worlds 288  
*Duncan Earle*
- Teaching, Testimony, and Truth: Rigoberta Menchú's Credibility in the North American Classroom 309  
*Allen Carey-Webb*
- Between Silence and Lies: Rigoberta Va 332  
*Ileana Rodríguez*
- Menchú after Stoll and the Truth Commission 351  
*Mario Roberto Morales*
- Truth, Human Rights, and Representation: The Case of Rigoberta Menchú 372  
*Victor D. Montejo*
- The Battle of Rigoberta 392  
*David Stoll*
- Contributors 411
- Permissions 417

## The Battle of Rigoberta

David Stoll

a hoax, fraud, or lie? None of these labels is appropriate for a person telling how she lost three members of her family, but that is the implication. Once my book was translated into the column inches of journalism, the issue was the veracity of a Nobel laureate.

Ordinarily, cultural anthropologists such as myself are more interested in perspective than accuracy. That includes autobiographical accounts where partisanship is only to be expected. But in the case of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the story has been so appealing to foreigners that it has overshadowed other Mayan perspectives on the violence. I felt obliged to point out gaps between Rigoberta's story and that of neighbors because of the enormous authority that so many readers have attributed to it. If you take the book at face value, as an eyewitness account, you will probably conclude that guerrilla warfare in Guatemala grew out of peasants' need to defend themselves from intolerable conditions.

Because of the different story I heard from many peasants, this is what became the most important issue for me: Was the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) that Rigoberta joined, and whose version of events she gave us in 1982, an inevitable response by the poor to oppression? Should the conflict be understood primarily in social terms, as the inevitable outcome of centuries of oppression suffered by Guatemala's indigenous population? Or is it better explained on the political level, as the result of particular decisions made by particular groups including the U.S. government, the Guatemalan oligarchy, the Guatemalan army, and the opposition groups that decided to fight back with guerrilla warfare?

The Ixil Mayas whom I interviewed in the late 1980s had been a bastion of the largest of the three guerrilla groups, the EGP. Nearly everyone, including myself, assumed that the guerrillas had been a deeply rooted popular movement. If not, why would the army kill so many people? In the wake of repression, the EGP's support might seem impossible to gauge because survivors would be afraid to discuss it. This has become the most common rejoinder to my argument: that peasants were too repressed to say much about their experiences. Yet many Ixils were willing to acknowledge that they had supported the guerrillas. Some were also rather candid about the atrocities committed by the army, even in the late 1980s and early 1990s when they were still under army occupation.

Typically, Ixils said that the army had done most of the killing but blamed the guerrillas for being the first to show up in uniform with guns. If the EGP was to be believed, the Ixils were so oppressed that they had

... the critics have mixed their scholarly calling with their political beliefs, in the process converting oral literature—the most supple of genres and the most subject to personal invention—into an almost religious canon, bordering on the absolute. By delegitimizing every attempt at critical skepticism, they have obtained a contrary result: the status of the texts, specifically in this case that of Rigoberta Menchú, has actually become fragile, vulnerable to any misstep.

—Elisabeth Burgos (1999, 86)

For many of the contributors to this volume, my decision to publish the problems with a beloved story is hard to fathom. The dismay is not surprising in view of how and why the Nobel laureate told her story and why I decided to challenge it. Rigoberta Menchú was not the first to tell us that the Guatemalan dictatorship of the early 1980s was slaughtering peasants. The story that she told and Elisabeth Burgos turned into a book was instead an answer to the question: Why should we care? About another far-off conflict in which people we don't know are being killed for reasons we don't understand.

The first-person nature of the story provided an immediacy and credibility that no other narrative style would have achieved. That is why the book has been so effective in spreading interest in Guatemala to wider circles, especially in colleges and churches. That is why it could not have been as effective as anything but eyewitness testimony—the kind of account that I demonstrate it was not. How can you question the eyewitness nature of Rigoberta's story without suggesting that she is guilty of

no choice but to join the insurgency. It is true that they were living under a dictatorship. Most were poor; many had suffered discrimination. When the EGP sent cadres into the area, some Ixils were eager to join. Many more were interested in the revolutionary message, of a Guatemala where they would enjoy the same privileges as wealthy ladinos. But the pre-EGP Ixils were not facing intense repression. Despite patronal backlashes, they were regaining control of local governments from ladinos. Although the region was policed by a dictatorship, it was not militarized, because the army had no reason to be there.

Once the EGP began to assert control, a succession of Ixils told me, they were on the horns of a dilemma. If they cooperated with the guerrillas, the army would kill them in droves. If they cooperated with the army, the guerrillas would kill them more selectively. They were "entre dos fuegos" (between two fires), the peasant expression I turned into the title of my much-excoriated *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* (Stoll 1993). Once the army began to lash back at the guerrillas by punishing nearby civilians, in 1979–82, waves of Ixils joined the less homicidal EGP for protection. You can call this a popular movement if you want, but the connection with prewar political organizing was often weak.

My skepticism about why Ixils supported the guerrillas, and the anger of some of my colleagues that I expressed it, reflect the divide between *indígenas* and ladinos in Guatemalan life. On the national level, the guerrilla movement was a seemingly inevitable response to the 1954 CIA intervention and the right's destruction of democracy. But the leadership of the insurgency was urban and nonindigenous, with little participation by the country's Mayan population. Only in the late 1970s did the guerrillas recruit large numbers of Mayas. The most widely read account of that relationship is *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. So what do my interviews in Rigoberta's hometown tell us about the EGP's popular base there? Did her village join the guerrillas to defend itself from ladino landlords? Did many of her neighbors see the insurgency growing out of their own needs?

As I have often pointed out, oral testimony from a repressed town such as Usulután could be affected by fear of the army or distrust of myself. That is why I checked what Usulutanos told me against land records and human rights reports. Judging from both kinds of information, the epic struggle against plantation owners in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*

was actually an internecine conflict between K'iche' Maya in-laws. The first local political murders were committed by the EGP. These are mere details in terms of who bears responsibility for most of the subsequent killing—the army. But the import of Rigoberta's story is not just a detail, because it turned her family and village into model revolutionaries of the kind desired by the EGP.<sup>1</sup>

Judging from her story, five hundred years of indigenous resistance to colonialism had finally joined the larger revolutionary struggle. She gave foreign readers a firm sense of which side they should be on, even though the divided feelings expressed by Victor Montejo in his less-read testimonio *Death of a Guatemalan Village* (1987) were probably more widespread. Certainly there was Mayan support for the EGP—lots in the Ixil area and some in Rigoberta's *municipio*. But most of it was rather brief, for a year or two, and Rigoberta was telling her story at its apogee. When Rigoberta's story acquired the permanence of a book—not the original purpose of the tape recordings, which were for a magazine interview—it became a rationale for guerrilla warfare that acquired more weight than the many forms of Mayan alienation from this strategy. Over the next decade, as foreign readers fell under the book's spell, it consecrated a brief period of support for the guerrillas at the height of peasant consciousness, the golden age of militancy.

Still, the result was not just an EGP script or fabrication. Even if you object to Rigoberta's approach, her story became a parable about the social context of the violence that is easy to defend as truthful. By claiming to have suffered in ways that she never had herself, Rigoberta turned herself into a symbol for an entire people. By blaming all the violence on the army, she targeted the side that did 93 percent of the killing, according to the UN truth commission.

The main problem with Rigoberta's story is not that she chose to communicate the problems facing Guatemalan Indians by turning herself into a composite Maya, with a wider range of experiences than a single person could have. It is not important if her relatives died a bit differently than she says they did. Even if readers should know that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is not a literal account of her life, it is not hard to defend her narrative strategy because her most important claim is true—the Guatemalan army was indeed slaughtering defenseless villagers. In a crisis situation, Rigoberta was dramatizing herself the way a Hollywood scriptwriter might, to stir an audience and move it to care about far-off victims.

What mattered most in 1982 was orchestrating international pressure against the Guatemalan army to stop the killing.

That said, there is a problem with Rigoberta's story. Arguably it was not a major problem in the early 1980s, when the killing was at its peak and what mattered most was drawing attention to a human rights emergency. But now that truth commissions are delivering reports, what may have been a secondary issue is no longer so. I refer to the social background of the killing, including how it spread to previously quiet areas. If you interpret Rigoberta's story as the eyewitness account that it claims to be, you will conclude that the rebel movement grew out of the basic needs of her people, which is not what many of them have to say about it.

My books are controversial because they take the intense localism that many anthropologists have found in rural Guatemala, then use it to challenge the assumption that the insurgency of the late 1970s and early 1980s was an inevitable Mayan reaction to oppression. That Mayas had very mixed feelings about the guerrillas is not a discovery made by myself. Although the EGP was stronger in Rigoberta's region of the Sierra Chumatanes than in most others, a string of ethnographers (Davis 1988, 24–26; Watanabe 1992, 179–83; Kobrak 1997, 113; Montejó 1999, 63–65) have had doubts about the depth of its support, as have Yvon Le Bot (1995) and Carol Smith. Because Smith misconstrues my argument, let me quote some of her previous writings on the subject:

1. Did support for the insurgency spring from the steady immiseration of the poor? "Obviously, then," she concluded from her surveys of the prewar peasant economy, "it is incorrect to describe as general a pattern of increasing impoverishment of peasant communities in this period [to 1978], though one could point to increasing penetration of market relations into the fiber of indigenous society. . . . Both individuals and communities generally reported a much lower dependence on plantation income than was formerly the case. . . . there was no general trend toward increasing dependence on plantation wages, no general impoverishment, relatively little internal class polarization, and much less destruction of indigenous community organization than would be expected from the usual accounts of the period (Smith 1984, 212–16, for case studies, see Falla 1980 and Brintnall 1979)." No one denies that most Mayas were poor, that some welcomed the guerrillas, and that more joined the insurgency to protect themselves from repression. However, the tapestry of conditions that Mayas faced was not compatible with the ideo-

logical justification for the high cost of armed struggle, that the Mayas were being impoverished en masse.

2. Was the insurgency a last resort for peasants who had no other way to defend themselves? The last-resort paradigm fits some local situations, but more broadly it is not compatible with what we know about the origins of the Maya movement, which is led by people who are taking advantage of expanding opportunities. Nor is the last-resort paradigm compatible with the Maya movement's critique of the guerrillas as well as the army: that both sides imposed the war on Mayas. If the insurgency was an inevitable response to oppression, then ladino-led guerrilla organizations would not be guilty of imposing it. Here is what Smith had to say just as I was finishing *Between Two Armies*: "The guerrilla insurgency of the 1980s, in which many Maya participated, was not the kind of resistance described above—limited in goals, leaderless, localized. There was a clear strata of leaders, most of them middle- or even upper-class Ladinos, who had little experience with Maya culture or people. . . . From interviews with guerrilla leaders, as well as their own accounts, it seems fairly clear that they chose to recruit in the Maya area; Mayas did not seek out Ladino leaders for their own insurgency" (Smith 1991, 32).

3. Should blame for starting the violence be laid exclusively at the door of the Guatemalan army? Here I must repeat what so many peasants told me: although the army did most of the killing, it was often the guerrillas who were the first to visit their villages, as part of their announced strategy of spreading the war to new areas. Returning to Smith: "Both [Mario] Payeras [of the EGP] and Gaspar Ilóm of the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA) have discussed how difficult it was to enlist Maya, but how recruitment snowballed after army repression began. It is now widely recognized that many Maya joined the insurgency *after* they were attacked by the army for merely living in places the guerrillas visited. For these people, following the guerrillas into the montaña was little more than an act of self-preservation. We do not yet know what revolution meant to those who joined the insurgency as voluntary participants, since Maya accounts of the 1980s are mainly those of victims rather than rebels" (1991: 32).<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to Smith, our colleague Paul Kobrak (1997) was not the first to point out that "we're caught in the crossfire" rhetoric was a protective response to army repression. "Because so much coercion and

concealment is involved in this kind of warfare," I noted in *Between Two Armies*, "how can we be sure that statements of neutrality or alignment with the army are anything but tactical, James Scott's 'public transcript' as opposed to a 'hidden transcript' of support for the guerrillas? ... At the most public level, that is, face to face with the army, Ixils mimic its rhetoric, as when civil patrollers volunteer that 'we're protecting our communities from the subversives.' Almost as public, that is, offered to just about anyone except perhaps an army officer, are protective statements of neutrality such as 'we're between two fires.' This is the safest possible presentation of self, the least compromising in many situations where one's interlocutor is not clearly marked politically. Needless to say, sharper feelings operate below the surface. . . . it was not hard to elicit frank descriptions of how the army imposed itself in the early 1980s, and few or none could be said to share the army's point of view. Even ex-army sergeants, civil patrol leaders, and military commissioners recounted their experiences from the in-between position of the beleaguered civilian" (Stoll 1993, 125, 139)."

Like Victor Montejo, Duncan Earle, and Mario Roberto Morales, Kay Warren appreciates the importance of debating the painful issues I raise. Was the "just war" of the disenfranchised Guatemalan left also a just war for the Mayan population that paid so much of the price? Does an anthropologist have a duty to report the kind of information that I discovered? I'm flattered by Warren's suggestion that *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* is an experimental ethnography. She is right that I adopted some of the conventions of the exposé genre, and her juxtaposition of it with the testimonial approach is interesting. However, she minimizes the defensive attitude about Rigoberta that more than a few Guatemala scholars have shown. If the essays from our colleagues Smith, George Lovell, and Christopher Lutz are not sufficient evidence, compare some of Warren's interpretations of what I wrote with what I actually wrote. Any reader of my two books about northern Quiché can verify that (1) I do not accuse Rigoberta of fraud; (2) I do not neglect the scholarly literature on Mayan communities; (3) I am not trying to discredit popular opposition to state violence; and (4) I have no objection to reading testimonial literature as a mediation between individual and collective veracities.

Far from seeking to discredit *I, Rigoberta Menchú* or testimonial literature, my book insists on interpreting it on the multiple levels that its

significance requires. Comparing Rigoberta's story with those of her neighbors did not lead me down the "unitary path" that Warren decries. Instead, it led directly into the "contested interpretations in the past and their political stakes in the present" that she prefers. Listening to a wider range of Mayas has always been my explicit agenda. That my book was not a complete failure in contested interpretation is demonstrated by Mary Louise Pratt's complaint that I afflicted her with a "whirlwind of voices, details, innuendos, questions, possibilities, and judgments."

How could a scholar like Pratt, who has spent her career stirring up whirlwinds of contestation, find it tedious to listen to conflicting versions of events from Rigoberta's neighbors? How could some of the other scholars in this collection use the language of multicultural inclusiveness to belittle new information that enriches the study of a widely assigned book? For scholars not enmeshed in Latin America, the most astonishing feature of the controversy is how reexamining a life story could arouse so many furious objections. One reason is that, as a symbol for indigenous people and human rights victims, Rigoberta invokes the certainty-generating symbolism of martyrdom.<sup>4</sup> Yet no credible party questions the Guatemalan state's responsibility for most of the victims, least of all myself.

At issue in this collection is not my scholarship. My findings about the Maya-guerrilla relationship are corroborated by an array of sources. At issue is sacrilege, which I committed by questioning a revered figure. To borrow a term from Michael Ignatieff (1999), Rigoberta's story was a moral narrative that simplified the complexities of the Guatemalan conflict in order to engage foreign sympathies. By describing how Rigoberta's neighbors recalled the war differently than she portrayed it in 1982, I disrupted a story line that activists have used to build interest in Guatemala since the early 1980s. That is why I provoked the moral dualism that still underpins much thinking about Guatemala and manifests itself in this collection in a series of non sequiturs. Criticizing the guerrilla agenda hardly means portraying Mayas as being incapable of successful collective action (Beverley) or lacking agency (Warren). Challenging Rigoberta's version of events does not mean "disassociat[ing]" myself from the army's many victims (Fernan). Paying attention to conflicts within indigenous communities is not diverting attention from state violence (Sommer) or "blaming the victims" (Rodríguez). Showing

how Mayas used neutralist rhetoric to drop out of the conflict, long before the army and the guerrillas signed a peace agreement in 1996, hardly perpetuated the dualistic logic of the cold war (Ferman). Instead, I put the violence into more local context than moral dualism can accommodate.

Mary Louise Pratt is tempted to reduce my book to the culture wars over multiculturalism. However, my critique of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* will not be a "triumph . . . for the political right" unless instructors make it so, by trying to stifle the questions it raises. As an anthropologist, I support efforts to diversify the curriculum like the one that Pratt helped lead at Stanford University. She may be right that I have made it harder to use *I, Rigoberta Menchú* for certain kinds of consciousness-raising. But I doubt that it will disappear from many classrooms, reading lists, and libraries: too many instructors and administrators have come to its defense, for good reasons as well as bad. If anything, the controversy has made the book a better assignment for teaching constructed history, that is, how a memoir can be both partial and true. A few students may ask, Why are you assigning us a hoax? Should you still be wondering how to explain why *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is not a hoax, read my book.

Several contributors decry my campaign against Rigoberta, so I should remind them how it began. From 1990 to 1995 my campaign against Rigoberta consisted of four academic talks (for a Berkeley panel, a Stanford brown-bag, a department lecture in New York, and a guest lecture in Florida), for a cumulative audience of about one hundred people. The other part of my campaign against Rigoberta consisted of two testimonio scholars, John Beverley (1993, 1996) and Marc Zimmerman (1995), deciding to publish their responses to a twelve-page talkscript that I had unwisely sent one of them. My first publication on Rigoberta was several years later (Stoll 1997).

At the 1991 meetings of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) it was Beverley, not myself, who decided that it was time to debate one of my first conclusions—that Rigoberta had not witnessed her brother's burn to death as described in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Whether she had was significant to Beverley because he had defined testimonio as a first-person narrative by a person who is a protagonist or witness. If he was right about his definition and if I was right about Rigoberta not being a witness, then the most widely read testimonio was not a testimonio.

This was indeed a problem, which Beverley and his colleagues solved by redefining the genre (Gugelberger 1996, 1999).

However, they also began to attack my still-unpublished inquiry into *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. They doubted that I had found serious problems with the 1982 story, but if I had these were of small consequence because it was a work of literature transcending mere factuality. Yet they continued to insist on a rather literal interpretation. Alternative versions that I brought back were just a "he said, she said" problem between Rigoberta and a suspect anthropologist. Although they wanted her testimony to be accepted as reliable, they were reluctant to see it compared to other forms of evidence, an attitude that continues to run through their defense of the book.<sup>5</sup> Now I am guilty of "the prose of counterinsurgency," according to Beverley, and to publish what Rigoberta's neighbors say is to return her to the status of a native informant.

In this collection, only Mario Roberto Morales, Daphne Patai, Victor Montejo and Duncan Earle deal with my argument about why Rigoberta became a quasi-religious figure for many foreign scholars and activists.<sup>6</sup> In debates over the insurgency and the Maya movement, she closes the gap between ethnography and destiny—that is, between what we can reasonably establish about Mayan peasants and how many of us wish to see them, as a revolutionary subject that it is our duty to vindicate. Behind complaints about my "journalistic" methodology (that is, I interview and quote Mayas) is discomfort with the many who are not living up to our hopes for them. The discomfort has generated various rationales for protecting Rigoberta's 1982 story from contradiction by other survivors:

1. The repression argument is that most Mayas have been too repressed to be quoted reliably on how they feel. No doubt some are; others are not. The generalization that Mayas have been "silenced" means that what they have to say can be ignored if it does not fit their presumed place in history.
2. The collective-memory argument is that Rigoberta's portrayal of Mayan experiences is so representative that differences between what she and her neighbors say must be insignificant. Unfortunately, collective-memory claims tend to assume what needs to be demonstrated. What about Rigoberta's story is widely shared with other Mayas and what is not? George Lovell and Christopher Lutz seem reluctant to factor in Rigo-



berta's affiliation with the EGP, but the need is obvious to Mayas who feel that it manipulated them.

3. The helplessness-argument is that there is no reliable way to evaluate the discrepancies between Rigoberta and that of other survivors. To do so therefore falls into what Doris Sommer calls "the nefarious game of judging." But if everyone has the right to a preferred truth, how do we refute the Guatemalan army's version of events? If scholars like ourselves do not have the authority to evaluate contradictory versions of events, how can outsiders intervene in human rights cases?

In practice, scholars who recur to these arguments want accountability for the Guatemalan army and literary license for Rigoberta. Yet the laureate received the Nobel Peace Prize for her work as an indigenous human rights activist, not as an author. She and her editor Elisabeth Burgos-Debray were trying to persuade readers to stop massacres, not to create world literature. That they managed to do both is a huge accomplishment, but not one that can protect Rigoberta from obvious questions. The right to compare narratives about the violence cannot be confined to scholars with advanced training in literary theory. Human rights activists cannot hold the Guatemalan army to a factual standard while making excuses for the most widely read book about the conflict.

I would like to thank Arturo Arias for putting together this collection, as well as the contributors for taking the time to respond to my work. It is an honor to be the subject of a book, and I am sorry that the occasion requires me to point out its limitations. One is that few of the editorialists reprinted here had read *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* before they damned or praised it.<sup>7</sup> In particular, I should respond to an accusation that cannot be answered simply by referring readers to my book. It is that I "entered war zones in the friendly embrace of the army, interrogating—excuse me, 'interviewing' informants in the presence of armed soldiers." The author of this statement was the editor of this collection (Arias 1999). "It would be interesting to know," Dante Liano asked about the same time, "if the Guatemalan army opened its archives about the same time, 'if the Guatemalan defence, the novelist Eduardo Galeano and the Mayan educator Demetrio Cojtí turned Liano's rhetorical question into affirmations that the army had given me access to archives that it denied to the UN-sponsored truth commission. Via the essay by Ileana Rodríguez, this groundless accusa-

tion has become scholarship in a refereed volume published by the University of Minnesota Press.<sup>8</sup>

It is not hard to see how some of the recrimination could have been avoided. In the realm of might-have-been, there could have been a less injured response to my first presentations to small academic gatherings a decade ago. Some of the contributors to this volume do not grasp that much of the scandal is over their own phobic reactions. The result was to discourage communication, convince me to undertake a major research effort, and encourage Rigoberta to think that she would never have to face certain facts about her life. It is much easier to defend the story that Rigoberta told in 1982 than some of the arguments in this collection. Like a Bill Clinton scandal, the denials and cover-ups are more consequential than the original transgression. Why didn't someone persuade her to preempt my findings with a well-timed statement? She was already preparing a new book about herself (Menchú 1998) with the help of Dante Liano. Supposedly it was going to set the record straight. That is why I sent her a complete draft of my book in June 1997, to spell out what she would have to deal with. The only response was a delivery receipt from the post office.

When the scandal broke, Rigoberta countered that challenges to her story were an attempt to discredit all victims of the violence (Burt and Rosen 1999). Except for a few admissions in press conferences, this was her main response, and it was a popular one with many of her supporters, who decided that questioning her 1982 story was tantamount to defaming the Guatemalan army. In the national press the bulk of the editorializing was against me, not her, with the implication that there was no need for Guatemalans to read my work.<sup>9</sup> To make sure that they will not have the chance, some of Rigoberta's supporters pressured the Mayan publishing house Editorial Cholsamaj into killing its Spanish edition of my Ixil book.

Many have asked why I published the Rigoberta book just before the report of the truth commission—was I trying to discredit it? My book appeared when it did because it took two years and more than thirty queries to find a publisher, even in the North American academic presses. Finding a publisher for the Spanish translation has been impossible.<sup>10</sup> For some of the contributors to this volume, there never has been a good time to compare Rigoberta's story with that of her neighbors, and there probably never will be. Had I agreed to talk to the *New York Times* in

October 1990, I would be responsible for adding to the backlash against political correctness. Two years later, had I not declined comment to Tim Golden of the *Times*, I would have been guilty of discrediting the Nobel award. Had I published my findings prior to the signing of the peace agreement, I would have deflected international pressure on the Guatemalan army. Now that the reports of the two truth commissions are being digested, I am sabotaging them. If I waited longer, I would be distracting attention from the latest human rights trial or wrecking Rigoberta's bid to become president of Guatemala.

Fortunately, the controversy over my book did not divert attention from army atrocities or shatter the human rights consensus. The *New York Times* soon devoted more column inches to the truth report and a massacre exhumation than it did to Rigoberta's veracity. The indictment against the army does not depend on a story that was told eighteen years ago. Exhumation teams are digging up more evidence every month. In May 1999 the U.S. government released documents in which the army listed how it disposed of 183 kidnapping victims. Soon Rigoberta persuaded a Spanish court to indict General Efraín Ríos Montt and two other former Guatemalan dictators for genocide, terrorism, and torture.

Of the possible costs of my book, the one I take most seriously is that of depriving Mayas and other Guatemalans of a national hero. Until the press reaction to my book, I could not be sure that there would be much wounded feeling because Rigoberta had become so unpopular with her allies in the Maya movement and on the left. By the late 1990s it took some effort to hear anything but complaints about her, usually for being peremptory and unreliable. Perhaps because she receives such an uncritical reception abroad, she still spends much of her time there and is often criticized for failing to recommit herself to Guatemala (Zarbo 1999). Significantly, however, the criticism focuses on Rigoberta as a person, not as a symbol for victims of the violence. The reaction against my unread book helped her overcome some of the enmities she faces, but the relief is probably only temporary. As Diane Nelson (1999, 170–205) has pointed out, jokes about the laureate condense the ambivalence of Guatemalans over their ethnic, gender, and national identities. Feelings about her have become barometric.

There is no need to apologize for Rigoberta's stature. Nobel Peace prizes are not a reward for personal virtue. You get one because it serves a larger purpose in the opinion of the Norwegian social democrats on

the Nobel committee. Once that is understood, it was clearly a good idea to give Rigoberta the 1992 prize, regardless of what you think about the guerrilla movement. Internationally, the prize increased pressure on the Guatemalan power structure to make concessions to a rather weak opposition. Even now, the upper class has to face the fact that the Guatemalan with the most name recognition in the world is a Mayan woman from a peasant village. At least in human rights symbolism, the first is last, and the last is first. The award told the upper class that it could not regain international respect without acknowledging the rights of the poorest Guatemalans.

Unfortunately, some of the assumptions behind Rigoberta's fame have narrowed the range of what can be said without causing offense. When the army's crimes bestowed moral authority on the guerrilla coalition, the latter's claim to represent the rural population became difficult for the domestic and international left to question. It seemed too close to betraying the victims. Once it was hard to debate the assumptions behind the revolutionary thinking of the early 1980s, much of what Mayas had to say became suspect.

Not enough thought has been given to the Guatemalan left's dependence on international support. Much of Rigoberta's career can be attributed to the weakness of what she represents at home. While the Guatemalan left finds itself with moral high ground, potent symbols, sympathetic foreigners, and urban-based structures for channeling foreign donations, it does not have enough local organization and interest from the people it wants to represent. Entire careers, organizations, and funding plans have been predicated on "Guatemala heart of darkness" imagery that has a basis in history but may have more appeal in foreign foundations than in villages.

Even popular support for the reforms envisioned by the peace process is less than might be hoped. In May 1999, much of the left's potential constituency failed to vote for constitutional changes required by the peace agreement, with the result that these were defeated. In the November 1999 presidential election, the URNG-backed left coalition placed a respectable but distant third (12 percent) behind the ruling conservative party (30 percent) and the right-wing populist party (48 percent) of Efraín Ríos Montt, the evangelical dictator who defeated the guerrilla movement in 1982–83. The left's electoral weakness is part of the legacy of repression, and its support could grow quickly. But the vote

for Ríos is not just a function of intimidation. Even though Rigoberta has enough evidence to try him in a Spanish court, he is a surprisingly popular politician. For too many Guatemalans, including Catholics and Mayas, the man responsible for the peak of army massacres stands for law and order.

Using *I, Rigoberta Menchú* to canonize the revolutionary political claims of the early 1980s does not leave enough room for how many victims of the violence feel about it. If the story told in Paris remains sacrosanct, it will perpetuate a colonialism of images in which one person is held to be the indispensable intermediary between Mayas and the international community. Within Guatemala, Mayan intellectuals know that they do not have to fall into line behind a single leader; why do they still think they must on the international level? Perhaps this is what Rigoberta's foreign admirers have unwittingly communicated.

The most constructive suggestion in the controversy over my book has been made by the anthropologist Gary Gossen (1999). In the Mexican state of Chiapas, according to Gossen, Mayas are reading *I, Rigoberta Menchú* as a charter text, one that speaks to their identity as a people even though, strictly speaking, it is not about them. This is also how many Mayas in Guatemala hear the laureate's story. Because of the almost biblical power of the narrative, about a village girl who loses her parents to the army, flees abroad, tells the world what happened, and returns home in triumph, one woman's story becomes the story of a people.

Maybe it is time to liberate *I, Rigoberta Menchú* from the category of testimonio, which by its very name will continue to arouse expectations of eyewitness truth that this particular example cannot withstand. Let us instead think about Gossen's suggestion to teach Rigoberta's story as an epic. And not just for Mayas, as no small number of ladinos also identify with it. According to Gossen, epic narrative is about a time of tribulation; has a basis in historical fact; is told from a very partisan point of view; yet becomes a charter for a broader identity. An epic is, by the nature of its appeal, more or less beyond refutation for those who find it meaningful. But that does not mean that we should avoid historical exegesis of it. If *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is becoming national scripture for Mayas and other Guatemalans, that is all the more reason for scholars to be producing the historical criticism for which they will be asking us.

## Notes

1. Since several contributors defer to the Nobel laureate's January 1999 declarations, as reprinted in this volume, I should make a few clarifications:

1. At the Colegio Belga, Rigoberta was indeed in a work-study program. According to relatives, schoolmates, and teachers, she also attended two other Catholic boarding schools and the public elementary school in Uspantán, which enabled her to reach eighth grade.
2. Her mother's family, the Tums of Laguna Danta, indeed sold the claim they were disputing with Vicente Menchú to a ladino. However, the sale occurred five years after his death. For the three decades prior to Vicente's death, according to relatives, neighbors, and land records, he disputed land with his K'iche' in-laws.
3. Could Rigoberta have heard from her mother the story about her brother Petrocinio being burned to death? When Rigoberta's parents protested the death of their son in January 1980, their delegation told the press what the Chajules told me: that the seven captives from Uspantán had been shot.
4. Yes, Rigoberta had two brothers named Nicolás. According to relatives, the first died as a small child, long before she was born; the second lives in Uspantán. The inference that the still-living second Nicolás proves that there never was an earlier Nicolás is wrong and regrettable. It appeared in the *New York Times*, not in my book.
5. In this collection, Duncan Earle's experience in southern Quiché suggests just how slender a guerrilla presence could trigger army reprisals. Both sides had tremendous incentives to exaggerate Mayan support for the insurgency. Victor Montejo explains why Rigoberta's international success was a mixed blessing for the Maya movement. While it increased awareness of the Mayas as a living people, it also validated the guerrilla movement's claim on the Mayas as a loyal but suppressed constituency. In the same vein, I wish Mario Roberto Morales had shared with us his memoir of how he came to be a member of MRP-Ixim, the dissident guerrilla group that was repressed by the URNG as well as the army (Morales 1998). As a militant from the 1960s to the 1980s, a period in which Guatemala went from annual political killings in the hundreds to annual political killings in the tens of thousands, Morales understands how Guevarista youth gave the Guatemalan right more excuses for escalating repression.
6. For other points that should be made, see my response in the November 1999 issue of *Latin American Perspectives*.
7. Doris Sommer: "bearing witness has been a sacred responsibility throughout Christianity, which is why witnesses are martyrs etymologically and historically. . . . The double challenge for this Christian leader, as new and as beleaguered as Christ's first witnesses, is to serve truth in ways that make a difference in the world" (in this volume).
8. For other approaches to testimonio, see Ochando Aymerich 1998 and Burgos 1999.
9. "Certainly Rigoberta was a representative of her people, but hiding behind that was a more partisan role, as a representative of the revolutionary movement, and hiding behind that was an even more unsettling possibility: that she represented

the audiences whose assumptions about indigenas she mirrored so effectively. I believe this is why it was so indecent for me to question her claims. Exposing problems in Rigoberta's story was to expose how supporters have subliminally used it to clothe their own contradictions, in a Durkheimian case of society worshipping itself" (Stoll 1999, 246).

7. Other collections of essays on the controversy include the October–December 1999 issue of *Human Rights Review* ([www.transactionpub.com](http://www.transactionpub.com), with essays by Daphne Patai, Joan Bamberger, Brian Haley, Daniel Levine, and Luis Roniger); the November 1999 issue of *Latin American Perspectives* (with essays by Carol Smith, Norma Chinchilla, Victoria Sanford, Georg Gugelberger, Elisabeth Burgos, and myself); and the April 1999 and January 2000 issue of *Lateral* ([www.lateral-ed.es](http://www.lateral-ed.es), with essays by Carmen Ochoando, Elisabeth Burgos, Yvon Le Bot, and myself). Other reviews and commentaries have been published by Roger Lancaster (*NACLA Report on the Americas*, May–June 1999, responding to interviews with Rigoberta and myself in the March–April 1999 issue); Peter Canby (*New York Review of Books*, April 8, 1999); Charles Lane (*New Republic*, March 8, 1999); Ilan Stavans (*Times Literary Supplement*, April 23, 1999); Richard Gott (*London Review of Books*, May 27, 1999); and Hal Cohen (*Lingua Franca*, July–August 1999, with my response September–October 1999).

8. Liano's suspicions had been aroused by the fact that (1) I had consulted the public land records for Rigoberta's village, and (2) the records were housed in an archive at the government titling agency. Like other researchers who worked in militarized areas during the late 1980s (Zur 1997; Carlsen 1997; Green 1999), I dealt with the army only when required, which in my case was seldom. One reason I chose to work in Ixil country was that its contingent of foreign aid volunteers had the effect of lowering my profile. In Usulután I never had to deal with the military personnel because the area was no longer garrisoned by the time I did most of my work there, in 1993–95. If I had approached peasants through the army, they would not have told me about the crimes that it committed and I could not have quoted them the way I do.

This is not the first occasion in which Arias and Liano have been quick to launch allegations. In November 1998 they accused Ann Wright, the English translator for both Rigoberta's books, of "intellectual theft" and "piracy" because Liano and coeditor Gianni Minà failed to appear in the acknowledgments for the English edition of *Crossing Borders* (E-mail circulated by Marc Zimmerman, October 17, 1998). According to Wright, she translated everything she was given and never received the matter from the Menchú Foundation or the Spanish publisher who sold the English-language rights. Since the two editions were prepared concurrently, Wright was not working from the book in Spanish (E-mail, October 21, 1998).

9. "I found three main kinds of reactions," a researcher visiting Guatemala in mid-1999 told me: "apatly (mostly Maya); different sorts of conspiracy theories—the U.S. government paid you, etc. (mostly middle-class supporters, both ladino and Maya); and agreement (vindictive agreement from some and terse, regretful agreement from others). Is this similar to what you found? I would say half of the people I asked had barely heard about Menchú, let alone know anything about her story. The only people I met who had read at least part of your work were reporters."

10. Because *Between Two Armies* and *Story of All Poor Guatemalans* would otherwise be unavailable in Spanish, I have put both translations on my Web site at [www.middlebury.edu/~dstoll](http://www.middlebury.edu/~dstoll). In 1999, Editorial Abya-Yala of Quito, Ecuador, pub-

lished an edition-in-exile of *Entre Dos Fuegos*, for which I am profoundly grateful. Perhaps it can still be ordered from Abya-Yala via [admin-info@abyayala.org](mailto:admin-info@abyayala.org).

## Bibliography

- Arias, Arturo. 1985. "El Movimiento Indígena en Guatemala, 1970–83." In *Movimientos Populares en Centroamérica*, ed. Daniel Carmacho. Costa Rica: Ciudad Universitaria Rodrigo Facio. 63–119.
- . 1990. "Changing Indian Identity: Guatemala's Violent Transition to Modernity." In *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540 to 1988*, ed. C. Smith. Austin: University of Texas Press. 230–57.
- . 1999. "Más sobre las memorias de Rigoberta Menchú." *Guatemala Hoy*, January 18.
- Beverly, John. 1993. "El Testimonio en la encrucijada." *Revista Iberoamericana* 59: 484–95.
- . 1996. "The Real Thing." In *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, ed. Georg M. Gugelberger. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. 266–86.
- Brintnall, Douglas. 1979. *Revolt against the Dead: The Modernization of a Mayan Community in the Highlands of Guatemala*. New York: Gordon and Breach.
- Burgos, Elisabeth. 1999. "The Story of a Testimonio" and "Testimonio and Trans-mission." *Latin American Perspectives*. 26.9: 53–63, 86–88.
- Burt, Jo-Marie, and Fred Rosen. 1999. "Truth-Telling and Memory in Postwar Guatemala: An Interview with Rigoberta Menchú." *NACLA: Report on the Americas* 32.5: 6–10.
- Carey-Webb, Allen, and Stephen Benz, eds. 1996. *Teaching and Testimony: Rigoberta Menchú and the North American Classroom*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Carlsen, Robert S. 1997. *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- CEH (Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico). 1999. *Guatemala: Memoria del silencio*.
- Cushman, Thomas, ed. 1999. "Truth, Fact, and Fiction in the Human Rights Community: Essays in Response to David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*." *Human Rights Review* 1.1: 78–112.
- Davis, Shelton. 1988. "Introduction: Sowing the Seeds of Violence." In *Harvest of Violence*, ed. Robert M. Carmack. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 3–36.
- Falla, Ricardo. 1980. *Quiché rebelde: Estudio de un movimiento de conversión religiosa, rebelde a las creencias tradicionales, en San Antonio Ilotenango, Quiché (1948–70)*. Guatemala City: Editorial Universitaria de Guatemala.
- Fischer, Edward F., and R. McKenna Brown, eds. 1996. *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Gossen, Gary. 1999. "Rigoberta Menchú and Her Epic Narrative." *Latin American Perspectives* 26.9: 64–69.
- Green, Linda. 1999. *Fear as a Way of Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gugelberger, Georg M. 1999. "Stollwerk or Bulwark: David Meets Goliath and the Continuation of the Testimonio Debate." *Latin American Perspectives* 26.9: 47–51.
- . 1996. *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

- Ignatieff, Michael. 1999. "The Stories We Tell: Television and Humanitarian Aid." In *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention*, ed. Jonathan Moore. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kobrak, Paul. 1997. "Village Troubles: The Civil Patrols in Aguacatán, Guatemala." Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Michigan.
- Le Bot, Yvon. 1995. *La guerra en tierras mayas: Comunidad, violencia y modernidad en Guatemala (1970-1992)*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Menchú, Rigoberta. 1998. *Rigoberta: La nieta de los Mayas*. Ed. Dante Liano and Gianni Mina. Madrid: El País/Agular.
- Montejo, Victor. 1987. *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village*. Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press.
- . 1999. *Voices from Exile: Violence and Survival in Modern Maya History*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Morales, Mario Roberto. 1998. *Los que se fueron por la libre (Historia personal de la lucha armada y la guerra popular)*. Mexico City: Editorial Praxis.
- Nelson, Diane M. 1999. *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincennial Guatemala*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ochando Aymerich, Carmen. 1998. *La memoria en el espejo: Aproximación a la escritura testimonial*. Barcelona: Anthropos Editorial.
- Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (ODHA). 1998. *Guatemala nunca más*. Informe Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica.
- Smith, Carol A. 1984. "Local History in Global Context: Social and Economic Transitions in Western Guatemala." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26.2: 193-228.
- . 1991. "Maya Nationalism." *Report on the Americas* 25.3: 29-33.
- Stoll, David. 1993. *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 1997. "The Construction of I, Rigoberta Menchú: Excerpts from a Work in Progress." *Brick, a Literary Journal* (Toronto) 57 (fall): 31-38.
- . 1998. "Human Rights, Land Conflict, and Memories of the Violence in the Ixil Country of Northern Quiché." In *Guatemala after the Peace Accords*, ed. Rachel Sieder. London: Institute for Latin American Studies.
- . 1999. "Rigoberta Menchú and the Last-Resort Paradigm." *Latin American Perspectives* 26.9: 70-80.
- Watanabe, John. 1992. *Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Wilson, Richard. 1996. "Introduction." and "Representing Human Rights Violations: Social Contexts and Subjectivities." In *Human Rights, Culture and Context: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Richard Wilson. London: Pluto Press. 1-27, 134-60.
- Zarebo, Alan. 1999. "Trouble for Rigoberta." *Newsweek International*, June 21.
- Zimmerman, Mark. 1995. *Literature and Resistance in Guatemala: Textual Modes and Cultural Politics from El Señor Presidente to Rigoberta Menchú*. 2 vols. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Zur, Judith N. 1997. *Violent Memories: Mayan War Widows*. Boulder, Colo.: HarperCollins.