

Authenticity, Power and Politics in the Writing of History: Reflections on the Stoll-Menchú Debate

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In 1983, Rigoberta Menchu, a 23-year-old indigenous Guatemalan woman, spent a week in Paris relating her life story to anthropologist, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. These interviews became the basis for *I Rigoberta Menchu, a Peasant Woman in Guatemala*, in which Menchu vividly describes the murders of her family members at the hands of the Guatemalan army, as well as her role in the organization of peasants resisting class and race based repression. As civil war raged on in Guatemala, the popularity of her *testimonio* turned Menchu into an international icon. In 1992, on the 500th anniversary of the European colonization of the Americas, Menchu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at an event which rallied international pressure against the human rights abuses of the Guatemalan army and encouraged the peace talks which brought an end to over a decade of violence.

In the wake of the Guatemalan civil war and as Menchú's presence loomed large on the global stage, David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* raised a rather uncomfortable question: what if much of Rigoberta Menchu's story is not true? Stoll, who visited Menchu's hometown Uspantan to conduct his own series of interviews and archival research, devotes much of his text to disproving her autobiographical claims and discrediting Menchú as an eyewitness. While conflicting claims characterize any history, Stoll argues that the inaccuracies and untruths in Menchu's *testimonio* were crafted as part of a political scheme to advance the cause of the leftist revolutionary group to which she belonged. In short, his project forces the reader to weigh one account of history against another. In the process, Stoll raises many interesting questions regarding issues of power, authenticity, bias and politics in the writing of history. Through an examination of the way standards of truth are culturally

conceived and collective memories are validated, it will become apparent that while not empirically true, Rigoberta Menchú's testimony is still a legitimate historical text and a useful tool for accomplishing humanitarian aims. In addition, a discussion of the ways in which bias, unbalanced power relationships and politics have affected Stoll's methodology will clarify the connection between historical authenticity and authority.

At the core of the Stoll-Menchu conflict, is a discordance between different standards of truth. Although both histories may be true (or equally false), the context from which they arise must be studied so that cultural constructions can be exposed. Critics have struggled to make sense of conflicting claims by distinguishing between Stoll's objective conception of authenticity and Menchú's more complicated understanding of it.¹ Arguing that "it is a mistake to assume that epistemic validity matters only in the Western tradition,"² Stoll applies a western model of truth, in his evaluation of Menchu, by sorting each of her nuanced expressions into the category of truth or lie. Menchu, working from a Mayan oral tradition, does not subscribe to the same empirical standard. Although Menchu's way of telling may seem mythical and un-academic when held up to Stoll's criterion of truth versus lie, it would be a mistake to discount it; even incorrect memories can reveal much about the interests of their tellers.

Rigoberta Menchu establishes a clear truth agreement with her audience which is valid, even though it does not hold up to Stoll's empirical standard. Menchu's account is a work of intricate and emotionally charged storytelling wherein personal and composite memories intertwine. This is a result of the context in which she told her story. She repeatedly reminds the audience that she withholds secrets and, from the outset, establishes a complex truth agreement in which she makes clear that objective, empirical knowledge is not her priority. At the time Rigoberta told her story, writes Leigh Gilmore in "Jurisdictions", the memory of extraction of secrets through torture could not have been far from her consciousness, and she was also aware that anyone she

¹ Leigh Gilmore, "Jurisdictions: I Rigoberta Menchu, The Kiss and Scandalous Self-Representation in the Age of Memoir and Trauma," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28 (2003): 699.

² David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder: Westview, 1999), 189.

named would have been in danger of imprisonment or execution by the army. For Menchu, trustworthiness is measured by the ability to keep a secret and speech is “a nuanced arena of political and cultural sensitivities.”³ Thus, although Rigoberta’s authenticity falters when held up to academic standards, it fits within the truth standard which she sets for herself in the context she told her story.

While Menchu claims authenticity on the basis of her role as an eyewitness and Stoll argues that his own version is more accurate because it “encompasses a wider range of versions”,⁴ neither author has a monopoly on the truth. By contradicting Menchu’s testimony with that of other Mayans from her district, Stoll attempts to prove that her experiences and beliefs were different than those of the many other indigenous people she claims to represent. Challenging her claim that the indigenous people were self-mobilized, Stoll argues that the majority of peasants did not share Menchu’s “revolutionary consciousness.”⁵ While it is naïve to believe that all peasants are true to Menchu’s representation of them as revolutionaries, it is equally unlikely that all Guatemalans are fairly represented by Stoll. In her review of *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, Kay B. Warren suggests that an alternative way to understand the Stoll-Menchú debate is to see it as a “clash of two exposés,” since “both books are highly personalized political works that marshal arguments to challenge particular power arrangements.”⁶ This is a valuable suggestion as it frees readers from the dilemma of distinguishing between right and wrong histories and leaves room for cultural and contextual considerations. To credit Stoll or Menchu as having a monopoly on the truth of what happened during the Guatemalan civil war, is to discount the varied experiences of those who actually lived through it and the forces that still shape the way they relate their stories.

According to Menchu’s truth agreement, collective memory is a valid form of historical expression. To Stoll, claiming to be an eyewitness to events that she did not actually experience casts suspicion on the rest of her account and provides further indication of Menchu’s suspect political motives. Although Stoll makes a very convincing case that Menchu did, in fact, lie in an empirical

³ Gilmore, “Jurisdictions,” 705.

⁴ Stoll, *All Poor Guatemalans*, 65.

⁵ Stoll, *All Poor Guatemalans*, 143.

⁶ Kay B. Warren, “Review, Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans,” *American Ethnologist* 27 (2000): 759.

sense, his accusations are questionable because she never claimed to be telling the truth in the way Stoll understands it. In a particularly wrenching passage of her book, Menchú describes how she watched as her brother Petrocinio was burned alive by soldiers in the town of Chajul. Years later, Stoll returned to Chajul and determined that although the army had murdered Petrocinio, Menchu could not have been present at her brother's death and thus her version of history "is not the eyewitness account that it purports to be."⁷ Manchu, however, is quite explicit in qualifying her testimony when she states at the outset: "I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people...The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans."⁸ Warren accuses Stoll of failing to recognize "the truth value of collective veracities that are not personally observed."⁹ Experience of collective memory is a "hybrid way of knowing"¹⁰ which Stoll refuses to accept.

Thus, Stoll's problem with Menchu lies less in any particular discrepancy and more in his refusal to accept the terms of her project.¹¹ Within the framework, Rigoberta provides for the interpretation of her narrative, a claim to have witnessed an event first hand that can be interpreted as legitimate expression of collective memory. Even if she did not personally witness the murder of a brother, many Mayan children had. In arguing that she was not there to see it, Stoll effectively casts doubt on her individual ability to remember. However, the power of Menchu's images, which speak for the tens of thousands of Mayans who lost family members in the war, remains undiminished. Her only failure is that she neglects to comply with Stoll's notion of the way history should be told. To the majority of Menchu's readers, it does not matter that she knowingly represented the experiences of others as if she had lived them because she spoke for people who were never given the opportunity to speak for themselves. While it is important to recognize collective memory as a valid form of historical expression, Stoll's assertion that Menchu does not speak for all poor

⁷ Stoll, *All Poor Guatemalans*, 70.

⁸ Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (London: Verso, 1992), 1.

⁹ Warren, "Review," 759.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Gilmore, "Jurisdictions," 704.

Guatemalans raises questions about the legitimacy of a history based on one person's testimony.

Although oral testimony is often the only avenue by which illiterate or semi-illiterate people can participate in the creation of their own history, testimonials can be a problematic source of historical evidence. In the case of *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, failure to critically assess how culture, context and fear may have shaped his relationships with his subjects is damaging to Stoll's argument. Stoll conducted his interviewing in towns and villages which have been traumatized by civil war and where inhabitants still live in fear of the threat of violence. Critics have remarked on Stoll's naivety in thinking that fear, anger and political affiliations would not have affected the way inhabitants answered his questions about the war.¹² Stoll's flawed methodology is characterized by his failure to consider that as a white foreign academic, invested with all the authority his position implies, his stature would affect the way indigenous peasants would respond to his questions. Only a few years after thousands were routinely murdered by the government for suspected association with revolutionaries, one can imagine how anyone, let alone a foreigner, would have difficulty obtaining straight answers from peasants regarding their involvement with the guerillas. To complicate matters, Stoll does not speak K'iche and conducts his interviews in Spanish, which is not the first language of most Mayans. These cultural, economic, and lingual gaps contribute to the disparity in power which separates Stoll from his subjects. Despite criticism of academics who "idealize peasants to serve their own moral ends,"¹³ his own power relationships with the peasants he interviews are never explored.

The troubled historical relationship between the United States and Guatemala is yet another example of the way in which Stoll's position as an objective observer is compromised. Stoll overlooks the U.S.'s role in creating the environment from which civil war bloomed in Guatemala and obscures the fact that U.S. counter-insurgency training played a role in legitimizing massive human rights abuses by the Guatemalan army. The neo-colonial relationship of his country to Guatemala not only shapes his writing and opinions, but also the

¹² Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, "Of Straw Men and Stereotypes: Why Guatemalan Rocks Don't Talk," *Latin American Perspectives* 29 (1999): 32.

¹³ Stoll, *All Poor Guatemalans*, 232.

way in which he collects information and selects what to include in his text. Thus, Latin Americanist Carlos Flores believes Stoll cannot be the unbiased observer he claims to be.¹⁴ Flores makes a valuable point, as no historian is free from the context in which he or she constructs histories. A discussion of the 1954 CIA-led coup – which ousted democratically-elected Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, and replaced him with a series of neo-liberal generals, who, with the help of U.S. financing, led Guatemala down a steady path of militarization – is absent from Stoll's text. Instead of exploring the ways in which his own country may have played a role in the militarization of Guatemala, Stoll blames an “authoritarian streak in Latin American culture.”¹⁵ He criticizes a society rooted in violence without addressing the issue of why and how the model came in to being. While he blames the guerrillas for provoking the army, Stoll neglects to examine the “highly intolerant system deeply shaped by the Cold War which offered very few options for change.”¹⁶ Had Stoll's only aim been to show that Menchú's account is oversimplified and partly composite, then neglecting to contextualize the roots of Guatemalan violence would not have jeopardized his argument. However, since Stoll attempts to not only cast doubt on the veracity of Menchú's claims but move from an attack of Menchú to a condemnation of Guatemalan revolutionaries, his assessment is compromised by excluding a discussion of the international framework in which a culture of violence was created.

Admittedly, history is not created in a vacuum and no historian is completely free from the circumstances in which they write it. Since overlooking the U.S.'s role in creating a framework for the Guatemalan civil war serves the purposes of Stoll's argument, it is even more important to be critical of his nationalist bias. Advocates of global history, stress that the interaction between cultures, communities and governments is one of the most important shaping forces of history.¹⁷ A true evaluation of these forces is best accomplished when historians disentangle themselves from the assumptions and biases which come

¹⁴ Carlos Flores, “Review: Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans,” *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6 (2001), 169.

¹⁵ Stoll, *All Poor Guatemalans*, 154.

¹⁶ Flores, “Review,” 170.

¹⁷ Jerry Bentley, “Myths, Wagers and Some Moral Implications of World History,” *Journal of World History*, 16 (1) 2005. 51-81.

from belonging to a particular culture. As an anthropologist, Stoll must have been well acquainted with the notion that bias can play a role in compromising analysis of the 'other'. Stoll's characterizations of Guatemalans, in general, and of Menchu's politics, in particular, must be viewed in the context of a U.S. nationalist bias.

To return to specific power relationships, this striking disparity between Stoll, a western educated academic, and Rigoberta Menchu, the semi-illiterate peasant woman whose authority he challenges, creates a sensitive political situation. Charges of racism invoked by Stoll's attack of Menchu often become an issue when a white academic attempts to write a history of a victimized minority group. The power of representation has become a popular subject in recent academic debate and many critics have objected to Stoll's questioning the right of an indigenous woman to tell her own story. While it could be argued that Stoll's criticism of Menchu is admissible as an intellectual exercise, the highly personalized nature of his attack makes this interpretation hard to swallow. In reaction to Stoll's allegations, Menchu herself remarked that "whites have been writing our history for five hundred years and no white anthropologist is going to tell me what I experienced in my own flesh."¹⁸ Menchu and many others view the act of writing history as an exercise of power and privilege. Gilmore calls attention to the way Stoll "consistently claims the privilege of referring to the Nobel Laureate by her first name," in an effort to belittle her role as the teller of her own history.¹⁹ By discrediting Menchu as a narrator, Stoll attempts not only to set forth his own version of events, but to erase hers completely.

Next, Stoll aims his cannons at political correctness in academia. In justifying his right to question a subaltern testimony, Stoll attacks the tendency of western academia to censor itself in an effort to be politically correct. Interestingly, Stoll falls into similar methodological traps. Warning his colleagues that "deferring to the authority of fashionable forms of victimhood" will lead them to accept "a very partial version of the events."²⁰ Stoll argues that the "aura of unquestionability" which surrounds Menchu's story prevents it from being

¹⁸ Stoll, *All Poor Guatemalans*, 227.

¹⁹ Gilmore, "Jurisdictions," 703.

²⁰ Stoll, *All Poor Guatemalans*, 40.

critically assessed.²¹ Stoll is right to assert that if the desire to be politically correct is preventing critical evaluation of a historical account then it deserves to be examined. But while he criticizes other academics portrayal of Indians as “noble savages,” Stoll’s own characterization of them as victims denies Mayans a role as historical agents of change. In describing a fearful population, misled by the guerillas and brutalized by the army, Stoll strips Mayans of the capacity for political agency. Just as the work of other historians may be compromised by their desire to identify with the voices of the oppressed, Stoll’s refusal to identify these voices is equally damaging to his argument. Nevertheless, Stoll raises important questions about the pressures on researchers to conform to established norms of political correctness.

The fact that research and representation are governed by pressure to be politically correct suggests that academics do play a role in politics. Academics have a responsibility to question the political implications of their work and if casting doubt on the authenticity of Menchu’s testimony compromises the humanitarian goals that have been accomplished as a direct result of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, it is important that these ethical considerations be taken into account. In an effort to de-romanticize the myth of guerilla warfare in Latin America, Stoll accuses the Guatemalan revolutionaries of knowingly provoking a ruthless army into attacking vulnerable indigenous peasants and then using these images of violence to fight a “war of images,” in the international arena.²² Because Stoll waited for the peace process to come to completion before publishing *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, his book probably did not endanger anybody’s life. However, regardless of the intentions of its authors, history will always be used to serve political agendas and some critics have feared that the Guatemalan government might interpret his indictment of the guerillas as justification for the army’s ten-year killing spree. While absolving the guerillas for their violent acts may be crucial in making a political point, Stoll is correct in arguing that dichotomizing the actors of a conflict into victims and victimizers can overshadow the complexity of the situation.

Although Stoll’s mission to debunk Menchu’s oversimplified claims is a worthy academic exercise, it remains that whether Menchu lied or not, her

²¹ Stoll, *All Poor Guatemalans*, 274.

²² *Ibid.*, 124.

testimony played the defining role in mobilizing an international community into a campaign to stop the atrocious human rights abuses of the Guatemalan government. For this reason, it is hard to feel pity for the constraint of Stoll's right to express himself as an academic, when a more pressing need was intervention against a murderous army. This is not to say that the search for objective truth should take a back seat to international political campaigns; only that academic endeavors should be sensitive to volatile situations where human lives are at stake. For Stoll, the writing of history is an intellectual exercise in which he strives to uncover unbiased truths; conversely, Menchu was concerned with the ways in which history can best serve the aims of humanity. Of course, who decides how these aims may best be served is up for debate. Stoll's pursuit of objective truth may prove just as valuable to humanity as Menchu's distortion of it.

Contradictory versions of history can be especially problematic following a civil war when not only historians but all participants look back in order to make sense of a traumatic event. While many questions about the Guatemalan civil war remain unanswered, the Stoll-Menchu debate provides insight into the complexity of the conflict and the characterization of its actors. Stoll's flawed methodology raises many issues regarding the complicated relationship of academics to their subaltern subjects, and although Stoll makes a convincing case that Menchu's account distorts the empirical truth, Stoll's bias compromises his own claims to authenticity. In the end, Stoll and Menchu's versions of history are both flawed by partiality and power relationships. While Stoll embarks on an admirable academic endeavor in the pursuit of objective truth, the humanitarian goals accomplished as a result of *I, Rigoberta Menchu* provide a prevailing example of the power of testimony to affect and mobilize an international audience. Seven years after its publication, *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* remains an extremely contentious book among anthropologists, historians and Latin Americanists alike. One of the only agreeable points is that Stoll's most valuable contribution was to promote discussion on issues of authority, authenticity and the politicization of academic discourse.