

## *I, Rigoberta Menchú: Rigoberta Menchú on Secrets and Lies, Traps and Betrayal*

The 1980s and 1990s saw a backlash, at least among literary and cultural critics, against the Latin American authors who had achieved such success in the preceding decades. In part, this was because they were perceived as too white, too male, too middle class, and (for all their declared leftist credentials) too distanced from the suffering and struggles of ordinary men and women up and down the continent. Some critics championed instead so-called “post-Boom” authors, such as Argentina’s Manuel Puig, Cuba’s Severo Sarduy, Puerto Rico’s Rosario Ferré, or Mexico’s Ángeles Mastretta. The post-Boom is a nebulous category, but it was thought to include texts that were more accessible, more direct and more pragmatic, more modest in scope and ambition, less totalizing, closer to popular and youth culture, and more likely to be interested in questions of gender and sexuality. Things were complicated by the fact that most “Boom” writers were still writing, and many of them changed tack, perhaps in response to the younger generation’s interests. In critic Donald Shaw’s words: “The new young writers, including now a significant contingent of women authors, set a trend towards greater accessibility which in retrospect seems to have affected the later writing of some of their elders” (“Towards a Description” 93). The Left’s political defeats in the 1970s (with the installation of authoritarian regimes in countries such as Argentina and Chile) also tempered the triumphalism of the 1960s, when briefly Latin America after the Cuban revolution and with the publication of novels such as *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was in the eyes of the world for political as well as aesthetic reasons: Fidel and Gabo hand in hand. But disillusion soon set in, and the mutually-reinforcing relation between culture and politics was no longer so self-assured. The post-Boom was not simply a reaction to the Boom, but part of a widespread reassessment and recalibration.

For some critics, the more restrained and more inclusive social commitments of the post-Boom did not go far enough. They were tempted to give up on literature altogether. Literature and literacy both seemed to be indelibly stamped with the trace of a power differential that dated back to the colonial period. In the words of critic John Beverley: “literature as such was one of the instruments of European colonial rule (and by extension is implicated in the contemporary structure of neocolonial and imperialist control)” (*Against Literature* 27). It may have “spoiled the party to point out that [the Boom’s]

idealization of literature, which seemed to modern and radical, was simply reactivating an element of Latin American colonial and oligarchic culture." But increasingly Beverley was not the only one to think the party worth spoiling if it were true that "literature might continue to function as an apparatus of alienation and domination" (3, 4). Such critics therefore turned instead either to a sort of meta-critique (rather than literary criticism, a critique of literariness or of other discourses deemed complicit in maintaining pervasive structures of oppression) or to other, non-literary and sometimes disparaged, forms of cultural expression: film, music, graffiti, TV, dance, everyday life; in short everything covered by the new field of "cultural studies." Above all, briefly but with great intensity, they turned to what was once dubbed the "testimonial novel," but, framed in opposition to the traditional novel, was now known simply as *testimonio*. And the *testimonio par excellence*, the exemplary model of the genre, was Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú (Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, 1983), which presented the harrowing account of a young Indigenous (Maya Quiché or K'iche') woman, growing up in poverty and struggling for peasants' rights, confronting the state repression that led to the death of both her parents and a brother. Indigenous, a woman, non-Spanish-speaking, illiterate, activist, and persecuted: Menchú seemed the very opposite of the privileged sacred cows of the Latin American Boom.

There has been much ink spilled attempting to define *testimonio*. Let us begin with the simple idea that it is a historical account presented in the words of someone who was a protagonist or direct witness to the events described. Such texts, of course, are not new: the so-called "Chronicles of the Indies" by *conquistadors* such as Christopher Columbus or Hernán Cortés are, by this definition, also testimonial. In *testimonio*, however, readers and critics are looking for the other side of history, for accounts that would otherwise normally not come to light, perhaps from people who do not generally have the resources to set their story down in print (the opposite, therefore, of the professional writers of the Boom or post-Boom). A *testimonio*, then, is usually a collaboration between a witness and an intermediary: a journalist, anthropologist, or activist, for instance, who takes down the witness's story and puts it into written form. In Latin America, the first such *testimonio* is often said to be the Argentine Roberto Walsh's *Operation Massacre (Operación masacre*, 1957), a work of investigative journalism retold somewhat in the style of a detective story, based on extensive interviews with the survivors of a botched police operation to kill a

group of men suspected of collaborating in a failed anti-government uprising. Other early testimonial novels include Cuban anthropologist Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (*Biografía de un cimarrón*, 1966), the product of interviews with 103-year-old Esteban Montejo, a former slave (slavery in Cuba was not abolished until 1886) who also fought in the Cuban War for Independence. But the fact that Barnet's text was first translated as *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, with the author given as Montejo, rather than Barnet, already shows how *testimonio* troubles or complicates notions of authorship and authorial responsibility. Similarly, the original Spanish edition of Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* has the name of Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos on its cover; in the English translation, however, Burgos (in fact, the hyphenated Burgos-Debray) is relegated to the title page, where she is merely the book's editor. Whose words exactly are we reading? Authority and control are in the balance.

A genre that strove to be as direct and unadorned—in a word, anti-literary—as possible, to present the unvarnished truth, the “real thing” (as Georg Gugelberger's collection of essays on *testimonio* puts it), soon found itself trapped in debates about literariness and mediation. Such texts never promised to tell us everything. Indeed, at times they quite clearly indicated the limits of what they could or would say. Even so, before long Menchú's *testimonio* in particular was the centre of a fierce controversy about how reliable her account was, or more to the point how reliable we should expect it to be. Menchú was under fire for her supposed equivocations, but so were her readers, the critics who, it was alleged, had built her up into something she was not, in line with their own agendas. Yet the ensuing debate often negated Menchú's own agency, overlooking the resources she herself employed both to captivate us and to spring a trap that might bind us to her cause.

### *1. Private Pacts and Public Secrets*

As almost every *testimonio* is the product of some kind of collaboration, they usually have a story behind them that begs to be told. Hence it is important to read their prefaces, prologues, or introductions, in which the collaborator speaks in his or her own voice, explaining how the text that follows came about, and thus also anchoring its legitimacy and reliability in a pact of mutual understanding and good faith. In the case of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Burgos-Debray tells us that she met Menchú in Paris in January 1982: “Rigoberta Menchú was invited to Europe by a number of solidarity groups [. . .]. The idea of turning her life story into a book came from a Canadian woman friend who is very sympathetic

to the cause of the Guatemalan Indians.” The proposal is initially unattractive: “Never having met Rigoberta, I was at first somewhat reluctant, as I realized that such projects depend to a large extent on the quality of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. [. . .] As soon as we met, however, I knew that we were going to get along together. The admiration her courage and dignity aroused in me did much to ease our relationship” (xiv). Menchú moves into Burgos-Debray’s apartment for a week, and the two of them bond over food: “*tortillas* and black beans brought us together because they gave us the same pleasure and awakened the same drives in both of us” (xvi). For hours on end, Burgos-Debray asks her guest questions and tapes the conversations. Later, she transcribes and edits them, so that we the readers can take up the role of sympathetic listener that she first models for us.

Though the Venezuelan knows the requisite anthropological protocol, oddly it helps that she knows little specifically about Guatemalan culture: “I was able to adopt the position of someone who is learning” (xix). In what follows, therefore, Menchú is less the object of an ethnography than the active subject of what critic Mary Louise Pratt terms an “autoethnography,” a text that non-Western “others construct in response to or in dialogue with [. . .] metropolitan representations. [. . .] Autoethnographic texts are not, then, what are usually thought of as ‘authentic’ or autochthonous forms of self-representation. [. . .] Rather autoethnography involves partial collaboration with and appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror” (*Imperial Eyes* 7). Though Burgos-Debray and her interlocutor initially follow a template prepared by the anthropologist—“a schematic outline, a chronology”—Menchú increasingly introduces digressions that, Burgos-Debray reports, “upset my chronology.” After she has left, she sends back a cassette that she herself has recorded, unprompted, covering topics Burgos-Debray had not quite dared to broach. The Venezuelan takes this as a sign that Menchú was “a woman of complete integrity and was letting me know that she had not been taken in” (xix). It is as though the Guatemalan had second-guessed what might be missing from the account, and had assumed the responsibility of ensuring that the finished product was complete.

The resulting *testimonio* is therefore more thorough and far-reaching than Burgos-Debray had originally anticipated. As she explains elsewhere, “Initially, no one spoke about a book. What was proposed was simply a journalistic interview [. . .]. As our meetings progressed, however, I became aware of the fascination of Rigoberta’s testimony and her

own talents as a narrator" ("The Story of a Testimonio" 54). Moreover, whereas others advise her to "exclude the chapters about customs" on the grounds that they "would interfere with the drama of the account of repression" (56), she decides to include them. Hence the book is not simply immediately political, as had once been planned—an intervention in a current and ongoing struggle, backed by a particular organization—but rather a contextual account of politicization, detailing how (as the book's original Spanish subtitle has it) a political "consciousness" was "born." Hence we have both on the one hand the description of Menchú's family history and her early life, split between subsistence farming in the highlands and migrant labour in the coastal *fincas*, and on the other also a fair degree of attention paid to Indigenous customs and beliefs. An interview becomes an epic: "the story of all poor Guatemalans [. . .] the reality of a whole people" (1). Again, Burgos-Debray portrays this shift in emphasis and ambition as Menchú's decision. She has much more to say than the anthropologist had ever imagined.

Yet paradoxically, the text is also marked by Menchú's resistance to unburden herself further. She makes repeated references to "secrets" that she either cannot or will not tell. "This is part of the reserve," she states early on, "that we've maintained to defend our customs and our culture. Indians have been very careful not to disclose any details of their communities, and the community does not allow them to talk about Indian things" (9). Is, then, Menchú not telling us about her community? Are these not "Indian things" that she is describing when she discusses everything from rituals around childbirth to patterns of courtship and marriage? More paradoxically still, the text ends with what sounds like Menchú's repudiation both of her interviewer and of the project of producing books, in which she has been so intensely involved during her time in Paris: "I'm still keeping my Indian identity a secret. I'm still keeping secret what I think no-one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets" (247). It is almost as though the rug had been pulled from under the entire enterprise. It is also—ironically, just like her volubility and willingness to share—another sign that Menchú is insisting on her own agency and control.

What then is the effect of these repeated references to secrets? Is she always talking about the same classes of secret? What impact do they have on you as a reader: do they leave you wanting to know more? Write down some thoughts on what goes unsaid, on what

Menchú tells us she is *not* telling us in her *testimonio*. While you do that, I'll have a glass of *atole*, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: *Atole*

Rigoberta Menchú describes how, like many other inhabitants of Guatemala's northern highlands, she and her family spend much of the year as migrant labourers on large farms or "*fincas*" on the country's southern coast, harvesting (in harsh conditions and for minimal pay) cotton or coffee. Both products, however, are grown primarily for export. As she explains, "we're not used to drinking coffee. Our drink is *atol*, ground maize made into *atol*" (140). *Atol* is thus one of the very many uses to which people throughout Central America and much of southern Mexico (where it is called *atole*) put maize (or corn). Above all, maize is food, nourishment, prepared in a wide variety of forms, from the hand-made *tortillas* that are a staple at every meal (or which, with a pinch of salt, pass for a meal in themselves) to the *tamales* that Menchú mentions particularly in connection with special occasions; the husks are also fed to domesticated animals, such as dogs and pigs. More generally, as Menchú puts it: "Maize is the centre of everything for us. It is our culture" (54); a child born into the community is "already made of maize because his mother ate it while he was forming in her stomach" (13). To echo the title of Guatemalan writer Miguel Ángel Asturias's 1949 novel (drawing in turn on the Mayan sacred text, the *Popol Vuh*), these are *Hombres de maíz*: people of maize.

Menchú's "secrets" have attracted much critical attention. In the first instance, the critic Doris Sommer points out that this declared reserve or refusal to share is part of what distinguishes *testimonio* from autobiography, noting that autobiography is a primarily Western (and relatively recent) genre that, today especially, we assume "blushes with a confessional glow" ("*Rigoberta's Secrets*" 37). It is symptomatic that the forerunner of autobiography is often taken to be Saint Augustine's (fourth-century AD) *Confessions*. Not that we necessarily expect even the most confessional of autobiographers really to be telling us everything; but they keep secret the fact that they are still keeping secrets. By contrast, Menchú publicly (and insistently) returns to the fact that she is holding something back, something of vital importance. As Sommer comments, then, such declarations are "performative": "The gesture precisely is not silence but a rather

flamboyant refusal of information” (34, 36). In fact, it does not even matter if there are no secrets. The point is that this is a rhetorical strategy that both incites and frustrates our desire to know: “Before she denies us the satisfaction of learning her secrets, we may not be aware of any desire to grasp them” (34). The lesson we are being taught is less epistemological than it is ethical and political: Menchú’s voluble silence, her performative refusal, “produces a particular kind of distance akin to respect. So simple a lesson and so fundamental; it is to modestly acknowledge that difference exists” (36). *However much we imagine or hope we are in solidarity with her and her struggle, we are reminded that the basis of that solidarity has to be difference and respect. Her struggle is not ours, and never will be.*



Market in Chichicastenango, Guatemala

## 2. *Captivation and Betrayal*

Much as she had, against expectations, won over Burgos-Debray, Menchú and her story soon also captivated others. Her *testimonio* was almost immediately translated into English (as well as a dozen more languages; in fact, the French translation appeared even before the Spanish original). Banned in Guatemala, the book was read around the world. As critic David Damrosch notes, “It became an international best-seller, significantly increasing public awareness of the ‘dirty war’ that few had attended to outside

Guatemala" (*What is World Literature?* 231). Moreover, the book achieved further fame (and notoriety) as a contested text within the so-called "culture wars" in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1988, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was included on the list of books taught in a required first-year course at prestigious Stanford University in California (previously, the course had entirely featured dead, white, European men from Plato to Machiavelli, Shakespeare to Darwin). As noted by Mary Louise Pratt, then a Stanford professor, who participated in the curricular reform and taught on the course, "every year [Menchú's book] was the text students described as having had the greatest impact on them." But the move attracted national attention and "attacks in the media," with criticism coming to a head when, in 1991, journalist and author Dinesh D'Souza published a book entitled *Illiberal Education* that (in Pratt's words) "attacked Menchú on two opposing fronts: as an ignorant and uneducated Indian woman from whom we have nothing to learn, and as an Indian woman whose experience and life choices make her insufficiently typical to represent an indigenous view of the world" ("*I, Rigoberta Menchú*" 35). But the fact that Menchú's *testimonio* had drawn such ire from the Conservative right made it, if anything, even more iconic for the left.

As Pratt, again, reports: "its English translation came to be a reading of choice in social science and humanities courses seeking to develop critical and non-hegemonic perspectives and began to appear frequently in the freshman composition courses required of nearly all first-year college students" (36). Meanwhile, Menchú herself went from near-unknown activist to "the most famous indigenous leader in the world" (29). In 1992, symbolically the five-hundredth anniversary of the European arrival in the Americas, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. Though the prize was presented broadly in recognition of "her struggle for social justice and ethno-cultural reconciliation based on respect for the rights of indigenous peoples" ("The Nobel Peace Prize 1992"), there is no doubt that it was the success of her *testimonio* that ensured that Menchú was effectively the chosen representative of the entire Indigenous population of the Americas.

Trouble, however, was brewing. Even before the award of the Nobel Prize, a PhD student in Anthropology (ironically enough, also at Stanford) named David Stoll had already been reporting in conference papers that Indigenous people he had met in Guatemala disputed aspects of Menchú's account. Specifically, Stoll "suggested that Rigoberta's retelling of her younger brother Petrocinio's death at the hands of the Guatemalan



military [was] ‘a literary invention [. . .]. No one was burned alive; there weren't twenty victims; and the families weren't there to see it, least of all Rigoberta’” (Brittin, “Close Encounters” 108). Stoll received his Stanford doctorate the same year that Menchú won the Nobel Prize, in 1992. Some years later, in 1999, he published *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, the result of by now extensive investigation of Menchú's story, in which he claims to have found numerous errors: Menchú's family was more prosperous than she suggests; her father's land disputes were with other Indigenous people, not with ladino (non-Indigenous) landlords; she was more educated than she reveals; neither her mother's nor her brother's deaths were as she described; and so on and so forth. Stoll hesitates to call such discrepancies “lies”: “That Rigoberta turned herself into a composite Maya,” he admits, “with a wider range of experiences than she actually had, is not a very serious problem. [. . .] Her narrative strategy is easy to defend because her most important claims, about the Guatemalan army's killings, are true. Rigoberta was dramatizing her life like a Hollywood scriptwriter might, in order to have an impact” (273). Rather than criticizing Menchú herself, Stoll takes aim instead at Guatemala's guerrilla factions who (he argues) manipulated people like her.

As for Menchú's *testimonio*, Stoll claims that the problem lies less with its author(s) than with its readers, specifically left-leaning scholars and teachers: “books like *I, Rigoberta Menchú* [. . .] tell many academics what they want to hear. Such works provide rebels in far-off places, into whom careerists can project their fantasies of rebellion. The simplistic images of innocence, oppression, and defiance can be used to construct mythologies of purity for academic factions claiming moral authority on the grounds that they identify with the oppressed” (247). Others, however, were less circumspect about Menchú as they repeated and amplified Stoll's claims. As the scandal gained international attention, in newspapers across the world she was branded a liar: *The New York Times*, which broke the story (and put it on its front page) ahead of the publication of Stoll's book, called her a “tarnished laureate” and quoted one Guatemalan, a municipal clerk from the region where Menchú grew up, as saying that “The book is one lie after another, and she knows it” (Rohter, 60). In response, many of those who had previously championed Menchú came to her defence, some quite vehemently. Others felt betrayed. Yet Stoll's accusations hardly started the controversy around her book, and they certainly did not put it to bed.

How then should we read *I, Rigoberta Menchú* now? Perhaps in the first instance by granting her more agency than does Stoll, who tends to portray her as a pawn either of other actors within the Guatemalan resistance movement or of their fellow travellers and sympathizers in the North American academy. Burgos-Debray seems also to have come to a similar position (she and Menchú fell out some time ago, in part over which of them deserves credit for the book, including any errors it may contain) although initially, as she describes their bond in the book's introduction and in her framing of the account that follows, the anthropologist presents her almost as someone who could not lie even if she wanted to do so. She stresses that she finds her "childlike" and "astonishingly young" (xiv), negating, as David Damrosch observes, the fact that "Rigoberta Menchú had been evolving her story, and her self-presentation, in many public forums over the previous two years" (*What is World Literature?* 238). Damrosch adds, moreover, that the English publisher and Menchú's translator only intensify this impression, pointing to the book's "faux-naif cover portrait against a childishly painted multicolored background" (250) and observing of the translation (by the same translator) of Menchú's subsequent book, *Crossing Borders*, that "it carries on the old pattern of ethnicizing her as a figure of childlike innocence" (255). Treated as a child, Menchú is assumed to be without guile, her words a simple reflex of an age-old, ahistorical Indigenous culture.

### 3. *Games of Entrapment*

At the same time, paradoxically, Menchú is also assumed never to have had a childhood. After all, her *testimonio* tells us, this is someone who never went to school, who had to work and contribute to the family livelihood both on the *fincas* and in the highlands from a very early age. Stoll and Burgos-Debray seem to assume that this means that Menchú is unfamiliar with or unaccustomed to childish activities such as play and games. In fact, the thought that she might be playing seems never even to strike them. But we might read her book differently if we noticed its ludic dimensions, the ways in which she puts games to use, not least games of deception and dissimulation. The rhetorical invocation of secrets can, after all, be understood as a game played with the reader: a sort of guessing game, in which we are invited to speculate what, if anything, she may be hiding (a subaltern *Call My Bluff?*). But Menchú's real expertise is in traps, in games of entrapment in which we let ourselves be caught thanks to our own projections and desires. As she says when she first starts working seriously with the anti-government resistance, what

the other *compañeros* (comrades) “valued most in me was my knowledge of self-defence, my knowledge of our traps, and escape routes” (168). We are never more likely to be trapped by such games than when we fail to recognize that a game is afoot, when we assume that someone is either too honest or too unsophisticated to be playing games with us. We fall into such traps with our eyes open, led there by what we want to see.

The first action that Menchú and her fellow villagers undertake against the Guatemalan army follows precisely this pattern, of allowing their opponents to trap themselves via a complex game of what anthropologist Diane Nelson calls “assumptions of identity.” As Nelson points out, “Assumption in this case is a double entendre. An assumption is taken for granted. It is the unconscious, unexamined prerequisite for those identities that appear self-evident. Second, it suggests false pretenses—an assumed identity is one that is not true, perhaps taken on for nefarious purposes” (“Indian Giver or Nobel Savage” 307). Menchú tells us that, knowing that the soldiers are coming, they stage (in all senses of that term: play and undertake) a scene that will, if nothing else, demonstrate that the Indigenous are active agents of their own destiny: “We planned to give the army a shock and to show them we were organised and weren’t just passively waiting for them” (136). But the action’s success depends on the military’s assumptions that the Indians are indeed passive, and on the villagers’ willingness to assume that role, at least until the trap is sprung. They abandon the village. Then “We chose a *compañera*, a very young girl, the prettiest in the village. She was risking her life, and she was risking being raped as well. [. . .] So this *compañera* goes ahead on another path to a place that the army has to pass on the way to the village. That’s where we prepared the ambush. We didn’t have firearms, we had only our people’s weapons” (136). Those weapons are their capacity to deceive, but also others’ willingness or desire to believe that deception.

Predictably enough, one of the soldiers, the last in the line, is sufficiently enticed, when this young girl plays the “flirt” with him, to stop and dawdle. “Then one of our neighbours jumped onto the path, another came up behind the soldier. My job was to jump onto the path as well. Between us we got the soldier off balance. One of us said: ‘Don’t move, hands up.’ And the soldier thought there was a gun pointed at his head or his back. Whatever he thought, he did nothing” (137). Menchú and her friends then disarm him, taking both a rifle and a pistol, and lead him blindfolded to her house, by a roundabout route so he would lose his sense of direction. At which point, from relief no

doubt but also surely from a sense of the game, Menchú bursts into laughter: “I found it really funny. I couldn’t stop laughing because we didn’t know how to use the gun. We were very happy, the whole community was happy” (138). Playing on the surprise that they are more resourceful than others assume, but also on the expectations that a pretty young girl will follow the script of flirting with a man in uniform, the villagers construct a moment of communal joy, laughing at their own success, but perhaps also at us.

The point is not the old racist trope that the Indigenous (or any other subalterns) are somehow inherently untrustworthy. It is rather than our assumptions of unproblematic solidarity are no more than that: assumptions. Nor is the point that we should try to avoid traps at all costs—as if we could!—but rather that we should think more carefully about the game of entrapment and captivation that, as anthropologists Alberto Corsín Jiménez and Chloe Nahum-Claudel observe, structure the discipline of Anthropology and more generally (I would add) the politics of relations between elite and subaltern. Traps, Corsín Jiménez and Nahum-Claudel tell us, are also “bridges” just as (again, I would add) bridges are traps (“The Anthropology of Traps” 384). They “are material entanglements of lives, designs for complex and fraught relationships across the boundaries of the human and the nonhuman” (393). But as such, they are also generative and constitutive, “sources of relational energy,” “designs for co-habitation” that “mobilize, assemble and orient the circulation of energy in specific directions” (395, 397). Menchú makes clear that others underestimate her at their own cost. She may well be playing games with us, too. She even tells us how good she is at setting traps, and with her declared reserve and refusals indicates that no pact is forever, no agreement is unconditional, however well-intentioned we may think we are. But still, for the time being, she will tell us a thing or two, and expect us to be affected by what we hear: to take on new powers to affect and be affected, to speak up in turn and denounce the sources of the oppression she has had to combat. There is something on the line here, in a way that there is not necessarily in Boom or post-Boom literature. Which does not make literature an unworthy pursuit, as Menchú, too, is playing literary games to draw us in, building bridges and at the same time mobilizing the pent-up energies of captivation.

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