



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies



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# Hopscotch!

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Latin American Literature in Translation

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Latin American Literature in Translation

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

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*I, Rigoberta Menchú:*  
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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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.

They were too white, too male, too middle class, and too distanced from the suffering and struggles of ordinary men and women up and down the continent.

The post-Boom 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.



“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.”

(Donald Shaw)



Disillusion soon set in, and the mutually-reinforcing relation between culture and politics was no longer so self-assured.



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The post-Boom was not simply a reaction to the Boom, but part of a widespread reassessment and recalibration.



Some critics were tempted to give up  
on literature altogether.



“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).” (John Beverley)



“It would have spoiled the party to point out that this idealization of literature, which seemed so modern and radical, was simply reactivating an element of Latin American colonial and oligarchic culture. But [. . .] literature might continue to function as an apparatus of alienation and domination.”

(John Beverley)



Critics turned to what was once dubbed the “testimonial novel,” but, framed in opposition to the traditional novel, was now known simply as *testimonio*.



Menchú seemed the very opposite of  
the privileged sacred cows of the  
Latin American Boom.



*Testimonio* is a historical account presented in the words of someone who was a protagonist or direct witness to the events described.



In *testimonio*, 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.



*A testimonio* 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.



Whose words *exactly* are we reading?



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,” 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.



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.

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.





# **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.



“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.” (xiv)

“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)



“*Tortillas* and black beans brought us together because they gave us the same pleasure and awakened the same drives in both of us.” (xvi)

“I was able to adopt the position of someone who is learning.” (xix)



“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.” (Mary Louise Pratt)

“That gesture was the final proof that Rigoberta is a truly exceptional woman; culturally, it also proved that she is a woman of complete integrity and was letting me know that she had not been taken in.” (xix)



“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.” (Burgos-Debray)

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 a political “consciousness” is “born.”

“This is part of the reserve 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)



“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.

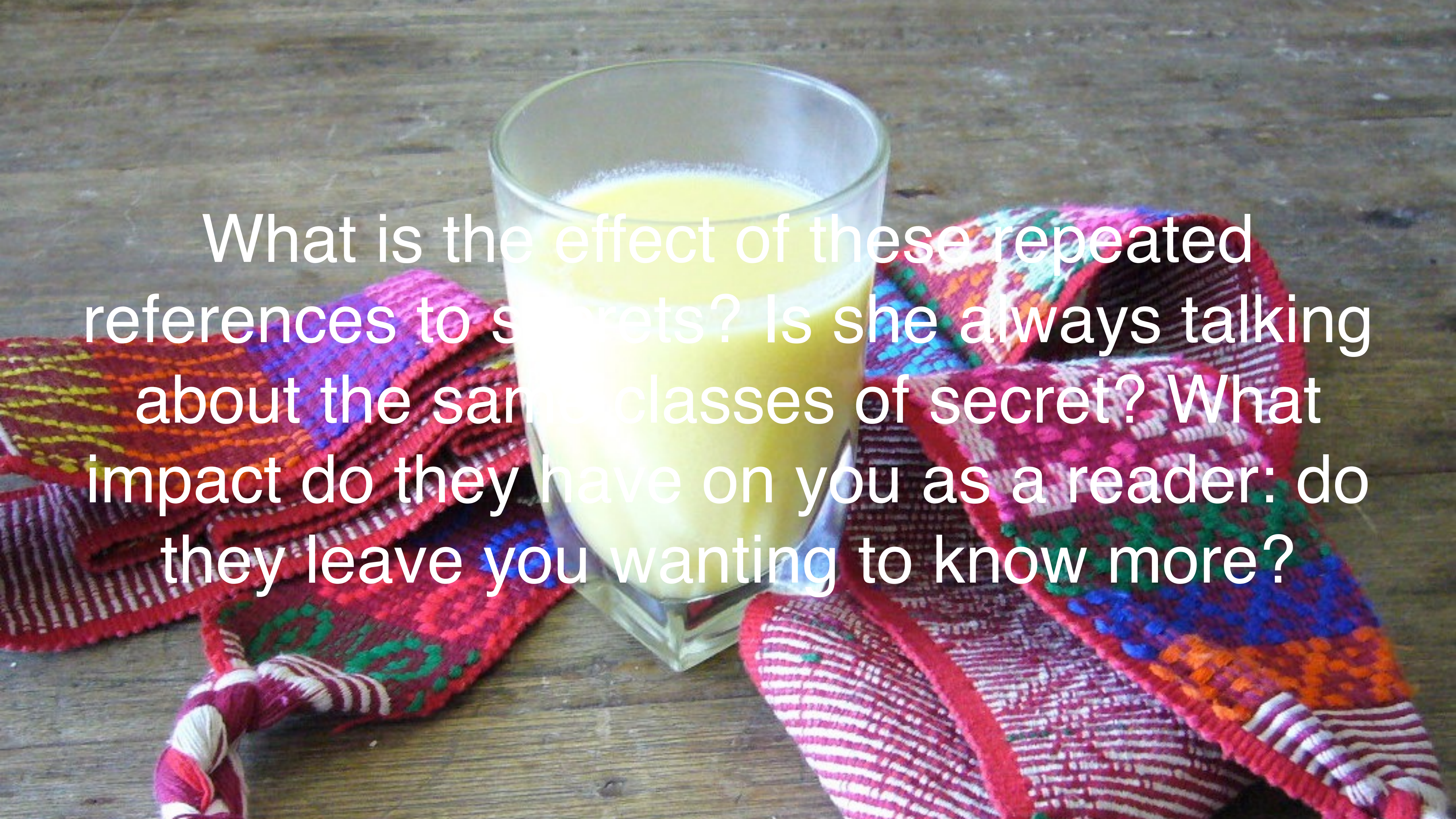
It is almost as though the rug had been pulled from under the entire enterprise.

It is also another sign that Menchú is insisting on her own agency and control.



What 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?



A glass of yellow liquid, possibly juice or milk, sits on a wooden table. The glass is surrounded by several pieces of colorful, woven textiles in shades of red, purple, blue, and green. The background is a rustic wooden surface.

What 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?



This declared reserve or refusal to share  
is part of what distinguishes *testimonio*  
from autobiography.



**“The gesture precisely is not silence but a rather flamboyant refusal of information.”  
(Doris Sommer)**

“Before she denies us the satisfaction of learning her secrets, we may not be aware of any desire to grasp them.”  
(Doris Sommer)

“It produces a particular kind of distance akin to respect. So simple a lesson and so fundamental; it is to modestly acknowledge that difference exists.” (Doris Sommer)



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.



# **CAPTIVATION AND BETRAYAL**

**Menchú and her story soon also  
captivated others.**



“It became an international best-seller, significantly increasing public awareness of the ‘dirty war’ that few had attended to outside Guatemala.” (David Damrosch)

“Every year [Menchú’s book] was the text students described as having had the greatest impact on them.”

(Mary Louise Pratt)

Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education*

“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”  
(Mary Louise Pratt).



The fact that Menchú's *testimonio* had drawn such ire from the Conservative right made it, if anything, even more iconic for the left.

“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.”

(Mary Louise Pratt)

David 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’” (Alice Brittin).



“That Rigoberta turned herself into a composite Maya, 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.” (David Stoll)

Rather than criticizing Menchú herself, Stoll takes aim instead at Guatemala's guerrilla factions who (he argues) manipulated people like her.



“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.” (David Stoll)

“The book is one lie after another, and she knows it.” (qtd. in Larry Rohter)



Stoll's accusations hardly started the controversy around her book, and they certainly did not put it to bed.

How should we read  
*I, Rigoberta Menchú* now?

How should we read  
*I, Rigoberta Menchú* now?

Perhaps in the first instance by granting  
her more agency than does Stoll.



“Rigoberta Menchú had been evolving her story, and her self-presentation, in many public forums over the previous two years.”

(David Damrosch)

Treated as a child, Menchú is assumed to be without guile, her words a simple reflex of an age-old, ahistorical Indigenous culture.



# **GAMES OF ENTRAPMENT**

Menchú is also assumed never to have had a childhood.



Stoll and Burgos-Debray seem to assume that Menchú is unfamiliar with or unaccustomed to childish activities such as play and games.

Stoll and Burgos-Debray seem to assume 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.

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.

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.



“What they 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.

“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.” (“Diane Nelson)

“We planned to give the army a shock  
and to show them we were organised  
and weren’t just passively waiting  
for them.” (136)



“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.

“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)

“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)



The villagers construct a moment of communal joy, laughing at their own success, but perhaps also at us.

Our assumptions of unproblematic solidarity  
are no more than that: assumptions.

We should think more carefully about the games of entrapment and captivation that structure the discipline of Anthropology and more generally the politics of relations between elite and subaltern.

“Traps [. . .] are material entanglements of lives, designs for complex and fraught relationships across the boundaries of the human and the nonhuman.” (Corsín Jiménez and Nahum-Claudel)



“Traps are designed to mobilize, assemble and orient the circulation of energy in specific directions.” (Corsín Jiménez and Nahum-Claudel)

**Menchú makes clear that others underestimate her at their own cost.**

Menchú makes clear that others underestimate her at their own cost.


She may well be playing games with us, too.

No pact is forever, no agreement is unconditional, however well-intentioned we may think we are.

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.



Menchú, too, is playing literary games to draw us in, building bridges and at the same time mobilizing the pent-up energies of captivation.



# MUSIC

Fósforo,  
“Cochabamba”



# **CATERING**


Ricardo García Martínez



# PRODUCTION

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# HISPANIC STUDIES







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# HISPANIC STUDIES

*¡Don't leave it to mañana!*

