

## Delaware Review of Latin American Studies

Vol. 5 No. 1 August 15, 2004

### An Interview with Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchú Tum, June 2003

**Jayson Ty Gonzales Sae-Saue**  
 Modern Thought and Literature  
 Stanford University

In 1983, Rigoberta Menchú told her life story to Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, a story that celebrated Mayan-Quiché culture while documenting the human rights abuses and political struggle of indigenous peoples in Guatemala. Burgos-Debray later structured Menchú's testimonio into the text *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, which was translated into English as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. The text quickly garnered global attention and summoned the conscience of the international community to the ongoing genocide of indigenous peoples in Guatemala under racist and classist political practices. In 1992 (the quincentennial anniversary of continental European arrival in the Américas), Menchú was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her life long activism in the field of indigenous peoples' rights. However, the legitimacy of Menchú's role as the global representative of Guatemalan indigenous peoples was publicly challenged when Larry Rohter published his investigative report, "Tarnished Laureate," in the *New York Times* on December 15, 1998. Rohter's report drew largely from the questions and criticisms in David Stoll's forthcoming book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, which disputes the veracity of events and narrative representation in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. As such, Stoll's text has instigated major battles between right and left-wing political institutions in Guatemala and throughout North America as well as heated debates (often personal) between liberal and conservative academics across disciplines and around the world. Arturo Arias' 2001 publication *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* is a collection of newspaper articles, interviews, and essays, which discuss the contexts and consequences of Stoll's scholarship in various academic fields; Mary Louise Pratt, as one of the contributors in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, examines the controversy within the context of North American academia, including the relationships between western scholarship and "truth" value; Doris Sommer, in women's studies journals and in her own books, has examined the consequences of the "Rigoberta Menchú controversy" within the context of gender studies; and Elizabeth Meese has considered the Menchú controversy in refiguring feminist third world criticism. As such, Rigoberta Menchú has become a figure for meaningful debate across academic disciplines including Cultural Studies, Feminist Studies, Gender Studies, Literary Studies, Latin American Studies, and Cultural Anthropology.

In the spring of 2003, I had the opportunity to work with Menchú as her personal translator during a three-day workshop in the Denver metro area in which she spoke to Denver youth on the importance of social awareness, community activism, and human rights advocacy. On June 17, 2003 I conducted an electronic interview with Menchú. My questions, for the most part, are structured around contemporary theoretical debates concerning the performance and functions of memory in formulating constructions of truth in Quiché cultural history.

#### **JGS: How do you see yourself as both a political and adult literary figure?**

RM: Por un lado, y sin duda alguna, soy una mujer política. Mucho de lo que hago se relaciona íntimamente con la política. Cuando se acciona en el campo de los derechos humanos, en la lucha por el reconocimiento de los derechos de los pueblos indígenas, en la lucha por la paz, se tocan teclas políticas. Y, lamentablemente, muchas de las cosas que podrían resolver la problemática actual dependen de aspectos políticos. En los últimos años, he madurado mucho, políticamente hablando. Pero, por otro lado, continúo siendo una mujer autodidacta, de lo cual soy muy orgullosa. Escribir libros no es mi actividad principal, pero lo he hecho porque veo la necesidad de producir ciertas cosas que tengan un impacto en determinados sectores. Por ejemplo, si escribo relatos para niños, es porque siento que es primordial rescatar, mantener y transmitir ciertas tradiciones orales maya-quichés por medios escritos, especialmente aspectos espirituales que hacen que nuestra cultura siga vigente.

[On the one hand, and without a doubt, I am a political woman. Much of what I do is intimately related with politics. When events occur in the field of human rights, in the struggle for the recognition of indigenous rights, and in the struggle for peace, they occur in political registers. Unfortunately, much of what could resolve the present polemics actually depends on political aspects. In the last few years, I have matured quite a bit, politically speaking. But on the other hand, I continue being a self-taught female, of which I am very proud. Writing books is not my principal activity, but I do it because I see the necessity to produce certain forms that have an impact on certain public sectors. For example, if I write stories for children, it's because I feel that it is fundamental to rescue, maintain, and

transmit certain Mayan-Quiché oral traditions through written means, especially spiritual aspects which allow our culture to remain strong.]

**JGS: How is memory situated in Quiché culture? What is its function and how is it enacted?**

RM: La memoria permite el mantenimiento, la reproducción y la transmisión de una cultura que ha sido fundamentalmente oral. La memoria forma parte integral de la identidad comunitaria. Nosotros los indígenas contamos con la memoria y nos ha permitido divulgar nuestra historia, una historia de opresión, de colonialismo, de explotación, pero una historia sembrada también de grandes luchas y grandes esperanzas.

[Memory allows for the maintenance, reproduction, and transmission of a culture that has been fundamentally oral. Memory forms an integral part of the community identity. We indigenous peoples rely on memory and it has allowed us to divulge not only our history of oppression, colonialism, and exploitation, but also a history filled with a great struggles and hopes.]

**JGS: How is history interpreted in Quiché culture? What are the roles of writing and orality in Quiché notions of history? How does history function in Quiché culture?**

RM: La historia está en función de la memoria y la tradición oral. Esta última ha servido para ir construyendo la historia de los pueblos indígenas. La tradición escrita sirve para fortalecer la tradición oral. Aunque hay que aclarar que los pueblos indígenas han ocupado una posición marginal en la historia oficial de Guatemala. Se les ha retratado de forma parcializada, incompleta y tendenciosa. Ahora bien, el desarrollo de las tradiciones oral y escrita se ha visto impulsado por la creación de la Academia de Lenguas Mayas, que se ha encargado de sistematizar el conocimiento lingüístico de los 22 idiomas que se hablan en Guatemala.

[History grows out of memory and oral traditions. The latter has served as a way to continue constructing the history of indigenous peoples. Written tradition serves to strengthen oral tradition. However, it must be clarified that indigenous peoples have occupied a marginal position in the official history of Guatemala. They have been depicted in a prejudicial, incomplete, and tendentious way. That said, the development of oral and written traditions has been propelled by the creation of the Academy of Mayan Languages, which has taken on the work of systemizing the linguistic knowledge of the 22 languages, which are spoken in Guatemala.]

**JGS: What is the relationship between memory, history, and truth in Quiché culture? In what ways do you feel standards and optics of truth in the USA differ from standards and optics of truth in indigenous cultures?**

RM: Ya he esbozado cómo se conectan la historia y la memoria. Los pueblos indígenas manejan verdades ancestrales, que no por ello son las únicas. A ambas se ha unido la verdad que (*sic*) [recibimos] por diferentes medios (testimonios, documentos, investigaciones), lo cual ha servido para completar la visión indígena sobre lo que ha ocurrido.

Aquí es bueno aclarar que se trata de una noción occidental y otra de otro tipo. Si existe un paralelismo, habría que encontrarlo en las tradiciones culturales e históricas de los pueblos indígenas de Estados Unidos, que han sido marginados e invisibilizados en la sociedad estadounidense. A ello hay que agregar que la verdad ha sido ocultada de los ojos y oídos del pueblo estadounidense. ¿Qué han dicho los diferentes medios de lo que realmente ocurría en Vietnam, en Corea, en Latinoamérica, en Irak? Se trata de una particular construcción de la verdad que no guarda relación con los hechos, tal y como éstos ocurrieron. Finalmente, los hechos hablan por sí mismos.

[I have already outlined how history and memory are connected. Indigenous people deal with ancestral truths, which does not mean that they are the only truths. The truth that comes to us through different mediums (testimonies, documents, research) has joined both and has served to complete the indigenous vision of what has occurred. Here, it's good to clarify that we are dealing with an occidental notion and a notion of another kind. If a parallel exists, you would have to find it in the cultural and historical traditions of indigenous peoples in the United States who have been marginalized and made invisible in US society. To this, you have to add that the truth has been concealed from the eyes and ears of the US citizenry. What have different media said about what really occurred in Vietnam, Korea, Latin America, and Iraq? It is a matter of a particular construction of the truth that bears no relation to the facts, how and as they occurred. Ultimately the facts speak for themselves.]

**JGS: How do you feel about your work being central to the “culture wars” in American universities? How do you feel about *I, Rigoberta Menchú*'s exclusion or inclusion in academic curriculums?**

RM: Creo que es una buena medida incluir mi libro en los programas universitarios de Estados Unidos, pues en ese país nunca se conoció lo que estaba pasando en Guatemala, con el apoyo y la complicidad de distintos gobiernos de Estados Unidos. A lo largo del planeta, el genocidio en mi país pasó inadvertido, en parte por la poca

atención que los grandes medios estadounidenses les concedieron. Salvo raras y contadas excepciones, el público estadounidense no se enteró de la “guerra sucia” que los militares guatemaltecos, entrenados y financiados por Estados Unidos, llevaban a cabo en Guatemala. Entonces, la inclusión de mi libro, en los planes de estudio, es adecuada, pues ayuda a compensar el desconocimiento que ha prevalecido en este país.

[I think that it is good to include my book in university programs in the United States since in that country, what was happening in Guatemala, with the support and complicity of various American administrations, was never known. The genocide in my country went unnoticed by all the world partly because of the slight attention given to it by the influential media of the United States. Except for a few rare exceptions, the public of the United States wasn't aware of the “dirty-war” carried out in Guatemala by the Guatemalan military forces, trained and financed by the United States. Therefore, the inclusion of my book in academic curriculums is appropriate because it helps compensate for the ignorance that has prevailed in that country.]

**JGS: Has the genre “testimonio” lost its power to mobilize peace movements?**

RM: No lo creo. El testimonio continúa manteniendo su poder de convocar a las conciencias del mundo sobre lo que está pasando en determinadas zonas del planeta. Lo que ha ocurrido es que ciertos sectores interesados en mantener una cierta historia oficial se han dado a la tarea de minimizar los testimonios, de restarles credibilidad. De lo que estos sectores no se han percatado es que, tarde o temprano, los hechos empiezan a hablar por sí mismos, con lo cual se desmorona toda esa historia oficial que han montado por décadas.

[I don't think so. Testimony continues to maintain its power to summon the consciences of the world to what is happening in certain areas of the planet. What has happened is that certain sectors interested in maintaining a certain official history have given themselves over to the task of minimizing testimonies, of stripping them of their credibility. What those sectors have not taken into account is that sooner or later the facts begin to speak for themselves, and these facts will disprove that official history that they have been fabricating for decades.]

**JGS: Can you explain how your Nobel Peace Prize helped trigger peace in Guatemala? Do peace efforts in the third-world always require support from the first world?**

RM: El Premio Nobel fue el reconocimiento a las víctimas de 500 años de opresión, explotación y colonialismo. Entonces, el Nobel sirvió también para darnos a los indígenas guatemaltecos mayor voz moral, no sólo por ser las víctimas del genocidio, para promover y exigir la paz en Guatemala. Es cierto que las negociaciones no vieron avances inmediatos, pero pudo usarse de plataforma para acercar a las partes y buscar puntos de entendimiento que, posteriormente, llevaron a la conclusión de los Acuerdos de Paz. Tristemente, el Nobel no ha bastado para consolidar la paz en mi país, puesto que los perpetradores del genocidio son quienes ahora gobiernan y quienes han enterrado esos mismos acuerdos de paz. Y no lo digo porque el Nobel concedido a mi persona haya perdido prestigio o que yo no haya estado a la altura del compromiso. Los enemigos históricos de los Acuerdos de Paz, aquellos que se consideran ganadores del enfrentamiento armado, son los que ahora han bloqueado el cumplimiento cabal del contenido de los Acuerdos. Se trata de una agenda muerta y enterrada.

[The Nobel Peace Prize constituted recognition of the victims of 500 years of oppression, exploitation, and colonialism. Therefore, the Nobel Prize also served to give us, indigenous Guatemalans, a greater moral voice -- now not only as victims of genocide -- for promoting and demanding peace in Guatemala. It's true that the peace negotiations didn't bring immediate progress, but the negotiations served as a platform to come together and search for points of understanding, which subsequently resulted in the Peace Accords. Unfortunately, the Nobel Prize wasn't enough to consolidate peace in my country because those same perpetrators of genocide now govern the country and they have buried the peace accords. I don't say that because the Nobel Prize awarded to me has lost its prestige or because I wasn't worthy of the commitment. The historical enemies of the Peace Accords, those who won the armed conflict, are the same ones who now have prevented the proper fulfillment of the provisions of the Peace Accords. It's a dead and buried issue.]

**JGS: In your opinion, what is the difference between testimonio and autobiography? What is testimonio?**

RM: El testimonio es la prueba, la confirmación, el relato de los hechos que una persona ha vivido. La autobiografía es un conjunto de memorias, de confesiones, de la vida de uno. Como se ve, la diferencia es muy sutil. Pero la discusión de si mi libro es un testimonio o una autobiografía es irrelevante, eso no empaña ni desmerece lo que ahí he contado y lo que sucedió en Guatemala, no sólo a mi familia sino a más de 200,000 muertos y desaparecidos, que en su mayoría son indígenas.

["Testimony" is the proof, the confirmation, and the relating of facts that a person has lived through. Autobiography is a conjunction of memories, of confessions, of the life of someone. As you see, the difference is very subtle.

However, the discussion of whether my book is a testimony or an autobiography is irrelevant; it doesn't sully or devalue what I narrated there and what happened in Guatemala, not only to my family, but also to more than 200,000 dead and missing persons, most of whom are indigenous.]

**JGS: How do you feel about the internet, and how has technology helped with your message and struggle?**

RM: Creo que ayuda a organizar ciertas cosas. Muchos de los movimientos sociales de la actualidad, como las manifestaciones contra la guerra, se organizan por medios electrónicos, a través de cadenas de mensajes. Internet ha permitido la coordinación de todo un movimiento de la sociedad civil, lo cual ha servido para preparar manifestaciones o distribuir información. Se ha convertido en otra forma de organizar y coordinar el activismo. Sin embargo, hay una tendencia a sobredimensionar el valor de la tecnología, con lo cual se cae en la deshumanización de todas las actividades. Es un recurso valioso, pues permite hacer las cosas más rápido. Gracias al internet, se han roto las barreras del tiempo y el espacio, pues alguien puede comunicarse con otra persona a miles de kilómetros de distancia de forma instantánea. En muchas ocasiones, hemos podido transmitir mensajes relacionados con nuestras luchas a favor de los derechos humanos y de los derechos de los pueblos indígenas, así hemos podido divulgar discursos y cartas a presidentes. A pesar de todo esto, la red no es lo extendida que uno pudiera esperar, pues en los países en vías de desarrollo persisten problemas educativos y de preparación tecnológica. Para manejar una computadora es necesario cierto tipo de conocimientos y para conectarse al internet se requiere de una línea telefónica, y en estos países la cobertura de ese servicio es aún baja. Persiste una brecha tecnológica entre los países desarrollados y los en vías de desarrollo.

[I think it helps organize certain things. Many current social movements, like the anti-war protests, are organized through electronic media and through chain messages. The internet has permitted the coordination of an entire movement of civil society, which has served to prepare protests or to distribute information. It has been converted into another form of organizing and coordinating activism. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to exaggerate the value of technology, with which comes a dehumanization of all activities. It is a valuable resource; it allows things to be done more quickly. Thanks to the internet all barriers of time and space have been broken, someone can communicate with another person thousands of kilometers away, instantaneously. On many occasions we have been able to transmit messages related to our struggle for human and indigenous rights; and that is how we have been able to circulate speeches and letters to different presidents. Despite all this, the web is not as extensive as one would wish. In countries in the process of development there persist problems in education and in technological preparation. To operate a computer, it's necessary to have a certain type of knowledge; and to be connected to the internet you need a telephone line, and in those countries the coverage of these services is still low. There persists a technological gap between developed countries and developing countries.]

**Selected Bibliography:**

Arias, Arturo. *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Burgos-Debray, Elisabeth. *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*. México: Siglo XXI Editores, 1985. (Originally published by Editorial Argos Vergara, S.A., Barcelona, in 1983.)

Burgos-Debray, Elisabeth, ed. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. New York: Verso, 1984.

Meese, Elizabeth. "(Dis)locations: Reading the Theory of a Third World Woman in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*." *Ex/tensions: Refiguring Feminist Criticism*. Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1990.

Rohter, Larry. "Tarnished Laureate." *The New York Times*, 12/15/1998, a1.2-4/a8.1-5.

Rogachevsky, Jorge R. "David Stoll vs. Rigoberta Menchú: Indigenous Victims or Protagonists?" *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies* Vol.2 No.2 (July 2001).

Stoll, David. *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999.

Stoll, David. "Conundrum or Non Sequiturs? The Case of Vicente Menchú." *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies* Vol.2 No.2 (July 2001).

Sommer, Doris. "No Secrets: Rigoberta's Guarded Truth." *Women's Studies* 20 (1991): 51-72.

Sommers, Doris. "Not Just a Personal Story": Women's Testimonios and the Plural Self," *Life-Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988.