

David Stoll vs. Rigoberta Menchú: Indigenous Victims or Protagonists?

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Abstract: The publication of *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Westview Press, 1999) by the anthropologist David Stoll has unleashed a major controversy. According to Stoll, a lengthy investigation carried out on the ground in Guatemala led to him to question some aspects of Rigoberta Menchú's life as narrated in the text, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, a testimonial account of the Nobel Peace Laureate's growing up in an indigenous community in Guatemala in the midst of poverty and increasing repression and violence. In the media, Stoll's account has been taken at face value, starting with a front-page exposé-type article by Larry Rohter, published in *The New York Times* on December 15, 1998, under the title, "Tarnished Laureate". According to the media account of this controversy, Stoll has proven that Menchú lied about significant aspects of her life, and she is dismissed as yet another tarnished idol.

This account of Stoll's text is curious because he tells us that his intention was not to tarnish Menchú's public stature. Neither was it to dismiss the validity of the account that the Rigoberta Menchú text provides regarding the repression suffered in Guatemala during that country's thirty-six year civil war. Stoll's intent is not to question the victimization of the indigenous population, but rather to promote his thesis that the indigenous population was not a class-conscious protagonist in the civil strife. Stoll takes up an analysis of the Menchú family as an emblematic representative of the indigenous community, and, by providing a revised account to the one narrated in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, purports to demonstrate that the indigenous population in Guatemala was victimized by both the army and the guerrillas, and never constituted a rebellious class with its own agenda and activism.

This paper looks carefully at Stoll's own language to demonstrate that what is at stake in this controversy is the relative roles assigned to the investigating scholar and the object of investigation within a classical anthropological discourse. The Menchú text presents an active subject within an active community and provides an ideological lens to interpret the recent historical experience in Guatemala. Stoll's lengthy account attempts to remove the agency represented in the Menchú text, defining indigenous Guatemalans solely as victims, denying their role as protagonists in the social struggles that convulsed their society, and dismissing the ideological lens as representative of an imposed perspective from outside, rather than characteristic of an indigenous perspective. In so doing, Stoll reinscribes the role of the scholar, and in particular the anthropologist, as the guardian of truth claims, and relegates indigenous Guatemalans to the role of objects of study with no legitimate independent role in the creation of historical understanding. Through a careful analysis of Stoll's revisionist challenge, this paper intends to demonstrate that his account is logically incoherent.

With the publication of *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, David Stoll unleashed a major controversy, affecting both the narrative representation of Rigoberta Menchú's life, as well as the legitimacy of the Nobel Laureate's role as a representative of the indigenous people of Guatemala. Stoll's challenge of Rigoberta Menchú has had an unusual reverberation. A December 15, 1998 article by Larry Rohter in *The New York Times* turned Stoll's critique into an international cause célèbre, and has led to continued media and academic discussion in the U.S., Europe and Latin America.

There are numerous examples of the continued currency of Stoll's challenge, among these: the May/June, 1999 issue of *The American Enterprise* wondered on its cover, "Whatever Happened to the Truth?", and included a picture of Rigoberta Menchú over the caption "Liar," framed by similarly labeled smug pictures of O.J. Simpson and President Clinton. Inside the magazine, in an article by Kenneth Lee, we read that "Stoll's book . . . catalogs a devastating list of exaggerations and fabrications in Menchú's famous book" (43). On October 26, 1999 *The Washington Post* presented a discussion of the recently published memoirs by the Palestinian literary critic, Edward Said. Said has run into his own controversy due to the publication of an article in *Commentary* magazine which questions his Palestinian credentials. Referring to the attacks on Said, *Washington Post* staff writer John Lancaster comments: "The charge has

been amplified by conservative critics such as Charles Krauthammer, who went so far as to compare Said to Rigoberta Menchú, the Mayan Indian whose widely praised autobiography—centering on the abuses of Guatemala's military government—was later shown to be partially false" (c6.1). Also, during the last meeting of the Latin American Studies Association, held in Miami in March of 2000, a panel was held on the topic under the heading, "Stoll-Menchú: The Invention of Memory," which counted with the participation of David Stoll.

Given this ongoing controversy, we should differentiate between Stoll's academic questioning of the Menchú text, and the cruder attacks and dismissals which are evidenced in the mass media, and which were initiated by the publication of Rohter's article in *The New York Times*. The controversy as it impacts directly Rigoberta Menchú as a person can be attributed to the front-page exposé-type article published by the New York daily, and not to any overt intention articulated by David Stoll in his book. In fact, Stoll tells us something very different:

To many ladinos as well as Mayas, Rigoberta is a national symbol and will continue to be one, however many vicissitudes she suffers because she is a living one. In Guatemalan intellectual life, she is a Mayan voice attempting to transcend the ladino-indígena dichotomy at the root of the struggles over national identity. By pointing toward a more equitable relation between the two great ethnic groups in Guatemalan history, her book is a national epic. The key passage in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is the first one: that "my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans." Even if the life told is not particularly her own, even if it is a heavily fictionalized heroic life, she achieved what she intended in a way that one person's actual life never could. (283)

According to Stoll, therefore, Menchú represents a promise that must be lived out in Guatemala if that country is to move beyond the internal schisms that have made it a long-suffering society. The defamatory elements of the controversy, therefore, must be more properly attributed to the media establishment; it was Larry Rother after all who placed a call to the Nobel Peace committee to find out if there were plans to rescind Ms. Menchú's award (Rohter).¹ It is not my intention in this article to address the role that the media has played in disseminating but at the same time transmuting Stoll's purpose. Suffice it to say, however, that, as Rigoberta Menchú herself has pointed out, her role does not rest on the merits of her book:

*El Premio Nobel de la Paz no es el Premio Nobel de Literatura. Este se lo dan a alguien que escribe libros. A mí no me lo dan por un libro. El de la paz es un premio simbólico por el papel jugado en el proceso de paz.*² ("Los que me atacan . . .")

Menchú's status rests on her ability to bring into the world-stage the representative presence of a previously disregarded and embattled ethnic population. No degree of questioning of the details of the Menchú text can annul this role, and neither does it appear to be Stoll's intent to do so.

What Stoll does want to challenge are some of the specific details of Rigoberta Menchú's life as presented in her 1983 account, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, claiming that they are not biographically accurate. Some of these details have to do with aspects of Menchú's own lived experience, such as Stoll's claim that, at a time when in her book she presents herself as performing clandestine organizing work in her home province of Quiché, Ms. Menchú was purportedly studying in a private school in the capital city. Other details have to do with elements of her father's life. According to Stoll, contrary to the description presented in Ms. Menchú's book, her father, Vicente Menchú, was not an indigenous peasant leader and one of the main organizers of a grassroots peasant movement known as the *Comité de Unidad Campesina* (CUC). Stoll furthermore wants to challenge Menchú's claims that her father struggled against the greed of *ladino* landowners, proposing instead that his main conflicts over land were with other indigenous individuals, and in particular with his wife's relatives, the Tums.

If it is not Stoll's intent to challenge Rigoberta Menchú's political legitimacy, why does he raise these concerns regarding the background of the Nobel Peace Laureate? Perhaps it is just a question of a search for veracity. Like all good social scientists Stoll may just be involved in a disinterested search for truth. He does raise the august semblance of the "true" from the very beginning of his text:

What if much of Rigoberta's story is not true? This is an awkward question, especially for someone like myself who thinks the Nobel award was a good idea. Still, I decided that it must be asked. (viii)

Stoll tells us that in the Menchú text he finds a complicated mixture of true picture and false details. Again, in Stoll's own words:

There is no doubt about the most important points: that a dictatorship massacred thousands of indigenous peasants, that the victims included half of Rigoberta's immediate family, that she fled to Mexico to save her life, and that she joined a revolutionary movement to liberate her country. On these

points Rigoberta's account is beyond challenge and deserves the attention it receives.³ (viii)

What Stoll does want to challenge is "the situation of her family and village before the war" (viii.)

The problem, therefore, seems to be that, according to Stoll, Rigoberta Menchú's account is not faithful to particular details of her own history. At this point we should ask ourselves why a possible divergence from the actual lived experience of the narrator is such a significant issue that David Stoll considers it crucial to present his findings to the world, if in fact the Menchú text is a "national epic" that gives us an understanding of "the most important points" in the historical experience. Again, quoting Stoll, this time from an interview published in the Guatemalan daily, *Prensa Libre*:

*La precisión del testimonio de Rigoberta puede que no sea de interés para muchos guatemaltecos, porque lo narrado es obviamente verdad, en un sentido nacional, aunque talvez no personal.*⁴
(Fernández García)

We find ourselves confronted with a conundrum. Stoll does not intend to challenge the large-scale historical veracity of the Menchú text, but rather the personal details that it presents; at the same time, Stoll does not intend a personal attack on Rigoberta Menchú--again, in Stoll's own words from the previously cited *Prensa Libre* article:

*No creo que mi libro vaya a hundir a Rigoberta. Guatemala necesita un símbolo como ella para pensar en lo que pasó durante la violencia y asegurarse que no se repita.*⁵ (Fernández García)

Stoll's project, therefore, appears to be on the one hand to reaffirm the role of Rigoberta Menchú as a symbol, while at the same time questioning the legitimacy of the account of her personal historical involvement in the national epic that she has come to represent.

What is at stake in this exercise? It is not the assumptions that we might make about the historical experience of the poor people of Guatemala, since Stoll acknowledges that in this respect the Menchú text is "beyond challenge." Neither is it the way in which Rigoberta Menchú may stand as a representative figure of this oppressed community, since Stoll does not wish to undermine Menchú's symbolic function. What Stoll wishes to remove is the agency that might be attributed to Rigoberta Menchú, and by extension to the community that according to Stoll she legitimately represents. In other words, Stoll has no problem acknowledging that the indigenous community in Guatemala has been victimized by violence, as long as the purely passive experience of being victimized is at issue; what becomes problematic is when the circumstance of victimization transforms the victim from object to subject, and empowers the person to become not just a representative image, but also a representative voice, assuming an active role in defining and projecting claims for moral and political authority. In Stoll's own words:

Whether victims deserve support is not the issue; instead, it is how we define who they are, why they are victims, and what should be done next. (244)

To better understand Stoll's dilemma with the Menchú text we should analyze carefully the relationship between active and passive subjects in the quote above.

First, as indicated previously, Stoll does not deny the need to extend support to the victim. However, victims cannot be allowed to present their own historical experience and make their own claims regarding who they are, what has transpired, and what needs to be done; it is the prerogative of the "we" subject to define who "they" are as victims, why "they" have become victims, and what must be done about it. The "we" subject takes on the active role of defining, whereas the "they" subject is simply relegated to being. As long as "they" passively allow themselves to be defined by a legitimate "we," the "we" can magnanimously confer the passive status of victimhood on them. The problem arises if "they" wish to put forth their own claims for definition, thereby challenging the authority of the "we." This active-passive polarity can be expanded to include notions of praxis and essence, history and myth. Rigoberta Menchú can be a representative social icon, what she should not be allowed to do is to act as a representative political agent.

In this effort to preserve the representative image of the Menchú text by purging it of a dangerous representative voice, Stoll is reaffirming the authority of the scholar as the proper arbiter of truth claims:

Anthropologists have long collected life histories from people. Ordinarily we do not dwell on whether the results are true or not. The very idea of refuting a life story sounds journalistic. More important is the narrator's perspective and what this tells us about the culture. (11)

As long as the anthropologist can be in charge of a process of collecting ethnographic images of the other, and

compiling these into an iconographic picture of cultural essence, there is no need to raise questions regarding truth statements. But the Menchú text is different:

Aside from being a life story, however, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* was a version of events with specific political objectives. It was also the most widely hailed example of testimonio, the Latin American genre that has brought the lives of the poor into scholarship in their own powerful words. (11)

According to Stoll, therefore, the Menchú text must be confronted by the scholar precisely because it has a specific political intent, it is the active voice of a representative subject who powerfully asserts an independent agenda. For Stoll this is unacceptable, since it reverses the roles between the “we” and “they” subjects. In the Menchú text it is no longer “we” who have the authority to define who “they” are, but rather it is “they” who inform us about a politically vital process and proposes what “we” ought to know about it. The loss of an authoritative voice for the scholar subject produces a sense of vertigo for Stoll. What is at stake in his confrontation with the Menchú text is the danger of losing the prerogative to define what is true, a prerogative accorded to the scholar within Western epistemology. Stoll wants to reinscribe the authoritative figure of the scholar into the process of narrative construction:

What if, on comparing the most hallowed testimonio with others, we find that it is not reliable in certain important ways? Then we would have to acknowledge that there is no substitute for our capacity to judge competing versions of events, to exercise our authority as scholars. (277)

As long as narrative construction is in the hands of the scholar who establishes ethnographic essences there is no need to invoke the authority of truth; as long as we are dealing with the synchronic dimension of myth “every version of the myth is the myth,” to borrow from Levi-Strauss; however, as soon as “they” appropriate to themselves the narrative voice, and the construction of history is at stake, the scholar has no choice but to take up the scalpel of truth in order to reassert his authority over the embodiment of reality.

In the final analysis what troubles Stoll particularly about the Menchú text is that it has the power to define reality; it has so much power that, according to Stoll, “Factual issues could seem insignificant because the atrocities she was trying to dramatize are so unquestionable” (275). Again, we are back to the tension between supposedly false details and acknowledged true picture. The atrocities are unquestionable: the Guatemalan government carried out a policy of genocide against the indigenous population during the time period evoked within the Menchú text. Stoll has no problem allowing Rigoberta Menchú to occupy the role of victim and to permit her to represent the truth that all poor Guatemalans have been victimized by the political violence that convulsed that society in the past decades. The factual issues that Stoll wishes to challenge are the ones that present Menchú and her family in the role of protagonists within a class conflict. Stoll first questions whether the Menchús were in fact destitute peasants; for this reason he needs to cast doubt on the possibility that one of Rigoberta’s brothers died of malnutrition while the family was working in a coastal plantation. He then questions whether there was indeed class antagonism between indigenous peasants and landowning *ladinos*; this is why he needs to try to establish that the bulk of the land claims that Vicente Menchú filed with the *Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria* (INTA) were against members of his wife’s family, and not against *ladinos*. Raising questions about the class status and class antagonisms experienced by the Menchús allows Stoll to challenge the need and the proclivity of Vicente Menchú to become a class-conscious indigenous peasant leader, affirming instead that he was never a leader within the CUC. The Vicente Menchú that emerges from Stoll’s narrative construction is an upwardly mobile petite bourgeois landowner who has no major gripes against the economically and politically powerful elements within Guatemalan society.

Given this re-characterization of Vicente Menchú it becomes that much more plausible that his daughter, Rigoberta, spent time as a student in a fancy boarding school. The advantage to this last claim is that it removes Rigoberta Menchú from the scene of the violence that was taking place in the Quiché, disqualifying her both as a socially conscious political activist, and as an eyewitness to the events she will later narrate. In this reconfiguration of the Menchú narrative, Stoll has removed all agency from what he acknowledges to be an iconographic representative of the indigenous community. Rigoberta Menchú and all the poor Guatemalans that she represents are no longer the subjects of their own history, but rather the manipulated and victimized objects of other people’s narratives.

But perhaps I’m being unfair to Stoll. Maybe I’m guilty of brandishing the very type of discourse that he condemns by assuming that what is at stake here is an issue of control over the mechanisms of narrative construction:

Since the 1980s a theoretical literature indicting Western knowledge as inherently colonialist has acquired considerable prestige in North American universities. In parts of the humanities and the social sciences, its exponents look like the new establishment. Under various headings, such as cultural studies and postmodernism, much of this literature carries on the self-critical, empirical tradition in Western thought. But the new theories can also be used to shut down investigation and debate, by reducing intellectual discourse to relations of power and dismissing opposed points of view as

reactionary. (276)

After all, rather than comparing the iconographic image of indigenous peasants that comes forth from the Menchú narrative with the alternative image constructed by Stoll, and pointing out the way in which the Stoll account drains the representative image of Menchú from all claims to subjecthood in order to transform it into a pure expression of victimhood, shouldn't we instead be asking questions about what is true? Stoll presents his quest as one conditioned by the search for a true picture composed of true details and tells us that we need to exercise "our capacity to judge competing version of events."

Let us try to exercise this capacity. What are the facts in dispute? Stoll tells us that Rigoberta Menchú was an educated young woman who studied at an elite boarding school in Guatemala City. Menchú acknowledges having spent time at this school. However, she claims that she was there as a maid, and not an enrolled student, and that for her services she did receive some instruction. She further claims that she used this experience as the basis for the fourteenth chapter of her book, "A maid in the capital," but changed the location to a private home to protect the identity of the nuns at the boarding school, fearing that they would be the object of retribution for hiding her ("*Los que me atacan . . .*").

It is curious to note that in this regard there are contradictory claims in public statements attributed to the nuns of the *Instituto Belga-Guatemalteco*, to which Stoll is referring. On December 16, 1998, we read in *Prensa Libre*:

*Según la hermana Margarita y otras monjas de la Orden del Sagrado Corazón, que administra el Instituto Belga-Guatemalteco, Menchú era muy buena estudiante, que llegó a finalizar el primer año de bachillerato.*⁶ ("*Polémica. . .*")

The very next day, however, and with no commentary regarding the above quote, we read in the same daily:

*La religiosa María Estela afirmó que la premio Nobel sí trabajó en el Instituto Belga-Guatemalteco como doméstica, y aprovechó alguna educación que le ofrecía una monja que era maestra en el colegio. "Es mentira que ella haya llegado hasta el bachillerato", dijo.*⁷ (Valladares)

It seems that at least in this case the true facts may be as elusive as the rabbit that Alice chased down the hole. Perhaps we are left with no choice but to attempt to construct a true picture from competing versions of the truth.

What about other details? What can be said about Rigoberta's brother, Nicolás Menchú, who appears dead as an infant in her sister's book, and who was interviewed by Stoll between 1989-1991 in Guatemala? Rigoberta Menchú informs us that in fact she has had two brothers named Nicolás, and that the first Nicolás did die of malnutrition. At the same time she acknowledges an inaccuracy in her 1983 account since the first Nicolás was older than she, rather than younger ("*Los que me atacan..*"). In this particular case there appears to be a death certificate that corroborates Menchú's corrected version (Canby, 32). If this is so, we might be in a position to chastise Menchú for enhancing the pathos of her narrative by including the death of her brother as part of her own personal experience, but at the same time Stoll's attempt to question Menchú's depiction of the class status of her family must also then be questioned in turn.

Similarly, we may want to ask why Stoll is so concerned about the details regarding the death of another of Rigoberta's brothers, Petrocinio. Stoll does not wish to deny that he was captured by the army, tortured, and later killed. This is part of the big picture that is "beyond challenge." What is under dispute is whether Menchú could have seen him burnt alive as part of a public execution, as she describes in her text. In fact, according to Stoll, his concerns regarding the veracity of the Menchú text were first occasioned by the fact that when he visited Rigoberta Menchú's village, Chajul, in the late 1980s, he was told that no such incident ever occurred in that village (1-2). Rigoberta Menchú, on the other hand, has continued to insist passionately that she will hold on to the truth of her account because it is what her murdered mother told her:

"My truth is that my brother was burned alive in Chajul . . . My truth because my mother saw it . . ."
(Moore)

At some level we need to choose the version of events that we wish to credit. However, we may also wish to ask: is this a difference that really makes a difference? In Stoll's own words:

In and of itself, the contrast between Rigoberta's account and everyone else's is not very significant. Except for sensational details, Rigoberta's version follows the others and can be considered factual. She is correct that the army brought prisoners to Chajul, claimed that they were guerrillas, and murdered them to intimidate the population. As best as anyone can determine, they included her

younger brother. (70)

So what, therefore, is the main concern? Stoll goes on to tell us what is at stake in this discrepancy:

The important point is not that what really happened differs somewhat from what Rigoberta says happened. The important point is that her story . . . is not the eyewitness account that it purports to be. (70)

At this point we might enter into a disputation regarding the nature of the narrative subject in the *testimonio*, a genre that Stoll surprisingly seems to understand rather poorly, since he tells us that “the oral equivalent of an autobiography [is] a genre known in Latin America as *testimonio*” (181). Most assuredly not. The *testimonio* is not autobiography, since the latter by definition narrates the lived experience of a unique subject who presents him or herself to us as a valuable object of consideration because of the special characteristics in his or her life; the *testimonio* on the other hand intends to construct a representative subject who will not be unique, but rather characteristic of an entire class. Rigoberta Menchú does not hide this in her text. She tells us at the very beginning of her story that, “This is my testimony. I didn’t learn it from a book and I didn’t learn it alone. I’d like to stress that this is not only *my* life, it’s also the testimony of my people. . . . My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people” (1). There is a conscious, unabashed statement here announcing to the reader of the Menchú text that we will come in contact with a constructed representative subject. As such, therefore, why should we be troubled if there are elements in the narrated history that are not directly attributable to the eyewitness experience of a particular individual, as long as we can determine that what is presented to us conveys an authentic experience?

Is the characterization of Petrocinio’s death that we find in Menchú’s narrative authentic? Again in Stoll’s own words:

True to Rigoberta’s account, it was not rare for the army to humiliate and torture captives before they were killed, even in front of their families. Nor was it unknown for the army to burn people alive--usually when they were trapped inside their houses. (69)

So is this whole controversy merely a big misunderstanding? Is it that Stoll assumed by the translation of *testimonio* into “testimony” that in fact Menchú’s text needed to function as a legally binding evidentiary declaration?

I don’t think so; despite Stoll’s inability or unwillingness to deal with the genre of *testimonio* on its own terms, and not as some form of folkloric autobiography, the controversy will not go away by clarifying this point. It won’t go away because Stoll, despite claiming that he is troubled by the details and not the overall picture presented in the Menchú text, in one key way does wish to challenge its authenticity, and not just its specific factualness. We can see where Stoll is troubled regarding issues of authenticity in what he attributes to those he considers to be blind advocates for the validity of the text:

In the solidarity and human rights milieu, as well as in much of the scholarly community, many still felt that Rigoberta’s account deserved to be interpreted literally, as a monument to the popular roots of the guerrilla movement in its northern Quiché heartland.⁸ (11)

The main problem is not that some have mistakenly taken the text to be a literal account of a single person’s life, but rather that the text has communicated the notion that the guerrilla movement represented a popular uprising.

Stoll finds the Menchú text to be inauthentic where it proposes that indigenous peasants had revolutionary grievances and that many organized under their own leaders to oppose a repressive society, and in the process entered into an alliance with an existing guerrilla movement. We are back to the question of political agency. By removing Menchú from the scene of the crimes Stoll wishes to challenge not the commission of crimes themselves, not her status as victim, but rather her potential role as social activist. Moreover, since Stoll’s purpose is not to disqualify Rigoberta Menchú personally, but rather to question the legitimacy of assigning a class-conscious political role to the indigenous population as a whole, he cannot simply remove Menchú from the scene. After all, maybe she was embellishing her own participation in the struggle, but what about other indigenous leaders? What about her father, Vicente Menchú? Didn’t he in fact die in 1980 when he formed part of a political delegation that staged a takeover of the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala City? Didn’t everyone inside the embassy at the time die--including important Guatemalan political figures--with the exception of the Spanish ambassador and of one of the protestors who was later kidnapped from a hospital and had his body dumped on the grounds of San Carlos University? Didn’t these deaths occur in the midst of a conflagration that overtook the embassy building, and which started under still murky circumstances after Guatemalan security forces stormed the building despite repeated insistence on the part of Spanish authorities that they were not to intervene? Didn’t this incident lead to a temporary break in diplomatic relations between Spain and Guatemala?

Given all of the above facts, which are as indisputable as facts can ever be, should we not come to the conclusion that Vicente Menchú was clearly involved in a high-level, high-stakes political action? If this is the case, how is it possible for Stoll to disqualify Vicente Menchú as a political figure? It is possible because Stoll turns Menchú into an empty cipher with no awareness of what he was doing. In order to prop up this image Stoll needs to refer to the testimony of an unnamed source:

“It’s true that the leaders [of the occupation] were not Indians,” a student who accompanied the delegation at the university told me, “but they entered the embassy out of desperation. I suppose that the campesinos didn’t understand where it would all go. Vicente Menchú wasn’t the leader, he was led. They acted out of euphoria, out of incitation. When you’re desperate, in a crisis, you look for support from the first people you find, and it was the [San Carlos] students who took advantage of them.”

Vicente Menchú was not the only leader among the campesinos, according to this source, but “he was the leader with whom the students dealt. Don Vicente became a spokesman for the Robin García Revolutionary Student Front, and a very little bit for the CUC. They would tell Don Vicente, ‘Say, “The people united will never be defeated,”’ and Don Vicente would say, ‘The people united will never be defeated.’ They would tell Don Vicente, ‘Raise your left hand when you say it,’ and he would raise his left hand.”⁹ (87-88).

In the formulation presented by Stoll, Vicente Menchú is transformed into an empty mannequin, without ideas, without a purpose, and obviously without the capacity to create his own history.

Given this representation of Rigoberta Menchú’s father, who figures within the latter’s text as the spiritual source for her own political and social values, it shouldn’t surprise us that Stoll cannot abide the notion that she is capable of narrating her own history. For Stoll, Rigoberta Menchú can function as a mythological symbol, or as a straw dummy who at best serves the purpose of absorbing and containing the contradictions of her society by displaying the ultimate pathos of victimhood, but she cannot be allowed to exist as a historical subject who acts on the basis of a political project that she enunciates as a representative voice for her community. According to Stoll, in Guatemala there was no indigenous uprising against long-standing historical conditions of exploitation and marginalization. The Menchú text is unacceptable to Stoll because, in the voice of an indigenous woman, it tells us of the existence of historical protagonists that he is unwilling to accept.

The question might be posed, however, how do we know that these protagonists existed? We know because the 200,000 victims of the violence in Guatemala were also subjects, with their own goals and aspirations, and not merely pawns in a historical chess game. We don’t have to stray beyond the Stoll text to realize that this historical protagonist is very much present. Who is the Vicente Menchú that Stoll elaborates for us? Stoll defines him as an ambitious man who comes from a very poor background, but eventually acquires land; his ambition leads him to prolonged legal conflict with his in-laws; he is open to receiving assistance from the Peace Corps; according to the testimony of disaffected former members of his community, he was quite capable of affirming himself as a patriarchal voice within the community; he sends his daughter to a private school in the city; when one of his sons is kidnapped he becomes involved in a radical political action at the Spanish Embassy.

Clearly this is a very forceful, aggressive, self-assured individual. How is it that at the same time Stoll wants us to believe that, in the context of Guatemala in the 1970s, he was also a poor dumb peasant with no political understanding whatsoever, and therefore allowed himself to be manipulated by student extremists, falling into a trap because he had no idea where he was stepping? These two representations have no logical relationship to each other. I would submit that we cannot formulate a coherent notion of personality if we attempt to fuse these two images. Vicente Menchú could not have been both of these things at the same time. We should definitely take Stoll at his word and exercise “our capacity to judge competing versions of events.” Once we do so we cannot accept as logically valid the monstrous image of Vicente Menchú that Stoll constructs in order to justify his own historical revisionism.

I would go further and propose that, were we to accept the image of the entrepreneurial farmer that Stoll laboriously fashions in his representation of Vicente Menchú, then we would also need to read in that representation the figure of a man who is constantly confronting the limitations that the social environment places in front of him. If this is the case, then, given the Guatemalan context of his time, Vicente Menchú as a personality could only exist as a subversive element. If we take into account that government forces exterminated close to 200,000 people, the great majority of whom were indigenous, simply because they couldn’t know for sure whether these were belligerent subjects, how could we possibly conceive that a personality like that of Vicente Menchú—whether it be the one that his daughter proposes to us, or the alternative one presented by Stoll—could possibly exist within this context without manifesting himself as an oppositional figure? This is precisely so because his own historically generated ambitions smashed head on into the brick wall of the socio-historical limitations created by his context.

No matter how we try to parse the elements of recent Guatemalan history, we can only be left with the assumption that the indigenous population existed as a self-motivated political subject. David Stoll writes almost three hundred pages attempting to bury the indigenous subject within the iconographic casket of a mythologized victimhood, but he only succeeds in creating a hollow drug store dummy. It is no doubt true that the version of Guatemalan history that Rigoberta Menchú presents emerges from her own political subjectivity. The construction of a testimonial subject is conditioned by the world-view of its creator. It is a representative subject within the context of a defined ideological discourse. And it is precisely because of this, and not in spite of it, that a text like *I, Rigoberta Menchú* needs to be read and studied. Those who wish to find unequivocal truth within the testimonio can just as well turn to the Bible or to the daily horoscope. However, if one wishes to pursue the difficult task of attempting to comprehend a vastly overdetermined historical process such as the recent Guatemalan civil war, the Menchú text is one essential point of reference. In his attempt to remove the indigenous political subject from the historical context Stoll constructs a logically incoherent narrative on the basis of fragmentary and contradictory data.

NOTES

- 1 As an aside, one may wonder if Rother bothered to pose a similar question regarding Henry Kissinger, since the latter's Chilean co-conspirator was indicted in Spain for crimes against humanity. [Return](#)
- 2 "The Nobel Peace Prize is not the Nobel Prize for Literature. The latter is given to someone who writes books. I was not given the prize because of a book. The peace prize is symbolic, and is given to someone because of the role they occupy in the peace process." (All translations from the Spanish are by the present author.) [Return](#)
- 3 According to a report released in February of 1999 by the U.N.-sponsored Historical Verification Commission, a series of dictatorships in Guatemala can be held responsible for directly causing the death of 93% of as many as 200,000 victims of politically motivated violence; most of these victims were indigenous. The same report charged the Guatemalan government with genocide, and also held the U.S. government responsible for aiding and abetting this criminal behavior. (Historical Verification Commission) [Return](#)
- 4 "It is very possible that the exactitude of Rigoberta's *testimonio* is not a point of interest for many Guatemalans because what is narrated is obviously true, in a national sense, although perhaps not in a personal one." [Return](#)
- 5 "I do not believe that my book is going to sink Rigoberta. Guatemala needs a symbol like her to be able to think about what took place during the time of violence, and to make sure that it is not repeated." [Return](#)
- 6 "According to Sister Margarita, and other nuns who administer the *Instituto Belga-Guatemalteco*, Menchú was a very good student, and she was able to complete the first year of secondary school." [Return](#)
- 7 "A nun by the name of María Elena stated that the Nobel prize winner had indeed worked as a domestic at the *Instituto Belga-Guatemalteco*, and that she had the benefit of some instruction that was extended to her by a nun who taught at the school. 'It is a lie that she reached a secondary school level,' she said." [Return](#)
- 8 This is in fact a mischaracterization of the Menchú text. In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the guerrilla forces appear as a parallel and pre-existing element functioning alongside the evolving radicalization of the indigenous peasantry. It is incorrect, therefore, to suggest that one can read in Menchú the notion that the indigenous population served as the "popular roots of the guerrilla movement." [Return](#)
- 9 When I read an earlier version of this paper at the Seventh International Congress of Central American Literature, held in Managua, Nicaragua, from March 15-19, 1999, Carlos René García Escobar, a Guatemalan anthropologist, was on the same panel. When the session was opened for general discussion he referred to this quote, and indicated a very different recollection of the circumstances. Mr. García Escobar said that he was a student at San Carlos University at the time those events transpired. He recalled quite vividly the indigenous contingent that arrived at the University looking for support. According to García Escobar's account, quite on the contrary from the image of the dumb peasants who were duped by the triumphalist students, it was the students who displayed great hesitation coming to the aid of the peasants, since they were afraid of possible repercussions given the extreme repressiveness of the political climate. Twenty years later Mr. García Escobar recalled these incidents with a sense of mortification, as he told the audience how the indigenous delegation marched from faculty to faculty looking for support, only to be rebuffed by the students due to their fear of reprisals. Finally, according to this eyewitness, it was the students grouped under the Robin García Revolutionary Student Front who agreed to join the peasants in their protest at the Spanish Embassy. [Return](#)

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