

In the spaces where I communicate in English – at work, in class, with friends – I wrangle hellish clients, I challenge problematic texts, I correct everyone’s grammar. Anything but quiet, my voice refuses to be passive.

Understanding that I grew up with a repression of language, and a language of repression, I now have a greater appreciation for language that affirms. I use English to make sense of Cantonese, dissecting the language I have such trouble speaking beyond single syllables. I explore each character’s meaning – its intricate shape and sound. Familiarizing my tongue with this language, I feel the corners of my polite smile relax.

Languages of Resistance in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*

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WRITER’S COMMENT: When Professor Marian Schlotterbeck announced that we would be analyzing the role of testimonies in Latin American human rights, I immediately knew I wanted to study Rigoberta Menchú’s riveting testimony of Guatemalan state violence. Menchú gained widespread international attention, and her use of language inspired a new literary tradition of testimonies in post-Cold War Latin America. These have proven to be invaluable artifacts of memory in the struggle for human rights. In addition to revealing the complex gray areas of unimaginable human rights abuses, these powerful documents represent a new form of indigenous resistance that synthesizes the power of ancient oral traditions with the written word. By highlighting the influence of indigenous oral storytelling on the form and content of testimony, I hope to demonstrate the value of indigenous systems of knowledge in understanding historical repetitions of horrific atrocities.

*INSTRUCTOR’S COMMENT: One of the most challenging aspects of a course on Human Rights in Latin America is to consider state terror – that is the decision to employ a policy of political violence against civilians. To understand this history on the level of an individual, students selected different autobiographical accounts by Latin Americans living through periods of intense repression. Their task was to reflect on both the narration of those experiences and the nature of individual responsibility and accountability. Sara chose to write about the controversial classic, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* by the Nobel Peace Prize-winning author. Sara deftly sidestepped the 1990s cultural war debates about the validity of Menchú’s account by instead focusing on the genre of testimonio. In providing a close reading of the text’s organization and the author’s motivations, Sara makes an impassioned and incisive appeal for the ongoing relevance of Menchú’s call for justice and the testimonio narrative form.*

– Marian Schlotterbeck, Department of History

The testimonial genre is a fusion form, negotiating tensions between the collective and the individual, orality and the written word, and violent suffering and ideological struggle. The relationship between language and power in both indigenous oppression and resistance is a recurring theme in the content and form of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the powerful testimony about state violence and oppression in Guatemala. Throughout her narrative, Menchú recognizes the way language can be used as a weapon, seeing the power of Spanish and the written word in dynamics between literate, Spanish-speaking *ladinos* and illiterate, indigenous peasants. Her political consciousness combines foreign ideological languages (Catholicism and Marxism) with indigenous knowledge to create her own resistance ideology. The form of Menchú's testimony itself reflects another hybrid language of resistance, a *mestizaje* that fuses indigenous practices of oral history with the durability of the written word.¹ The hybridity of the testimonial form demonstrated in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* reflects the strength of these mixed forms of indigenous resistance in creating new languages that gain transcultural support against oppressive forces.

As Greg Grandin argues in *The Last Colonial Massacre*, Menchú's narrative demonstrates the way indigenous groups were forced to radicalize in response to mounting intolerable state oppression. Menchú's testimony was published in 1983, during the peak of state violence: the scorched earth campaigns that decimated indigenous villages in Guatemala from 1981-1983 (Grandin 13). She and her interviewer, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, frequently refer to language as a key "weapon" in her struggle, both as an instrument of oppression and resistance. In this context, it is clear that Menchú's testimony does not just represent an account of historical events that encourages readers to "never forget;" it is a rallying cry for action, calling on international actors to recognize the injustice and trauma of state oppression during the height of the Guatemalan civil war.

In her narrative, Menchú combines the different languages of Catholicism, Marxism, and Spanish with her indigenous heritage as a

¹ My analysis of the dual performative and written aspect of the testimonial genre is inspired by Diana Taylor's work in *The Archive and the Repertoire*. While the length of this essay limits the development of this theoretical framework, further analysis into the testimonial fusion of the archive (the performative) and the repertoire (the written) would be of value.

form of ideological resistance. The difficulties she and her family experience in corrupt legal proceedings force her to recognize the power of knowing Spanish, the language of the dominant class in Guatemala, to gain political and legal agency. In one of many instances of linguistic manipulation, the interpreters that her family hires when her father is imprisoned turn out to be in collaboration with the state and misrepresent what the family wants to communicate in court. She observes the widespread effects of this power dynamic by stating that "in Guatemala, this is what happens with the poor, especially Indians, because they can't speak Spanish...[they] can't speak up for what [they] want" (Menchú 102). These interactions motivated her to learn how to speak Spanish, "so that they didn't need these intermediaries" (110). Her bilingualism ultimately enabled her to communicate with Burgos-Debray to create the testimonial text.

In addition to incorporating Spanish in her oral armory, Menchú adopts Catholicism and Marxism in her resistance ideology. She combines Catholicism with Q'eqchi' cosmology, asserting that her "main weapon is the Bible" (Menchú 130) and explaining how Biblical narratives fortified her litany of resistance while she maintained her Q'eqchi' spiritual values (131-140). Additionally, she combines Marxist ideology with Q'eqchi' culture, creating what Grandin calls a "Mayan Marxism" that offered political agency to indigenous groups (Grandin 120). While some may argue that she relinquishes cultural purity by integrating non-indigenous ideology, this form of resistance is a key aspect of indigenous survival in the era of globalization. Similarly, Burgos-Debray observes that Menchú mixes these different languages "to strengthen her own techniques [of resistance] and...to protect her own culture more effectively" (Burgos-Debray xviii). The form of Menchú's testimony reflects this strategy of resistance.

Burgos-Debray explicitly recognizes the oral-written hybridity of the testimonial form and the dual roles of the witness and the interviewer in her introduction, stating that "Rigoberta has chosen words as her weapon and I have tried to give her words the permanency of print" (Burgos-Debray xviii). Burgos-Debray positions herself as the mediator of the reader's reception of the mixed form. She urges the reader to "be guided by a voice whose inner cadences are so pregnant with meaning that we actually seem to hear her speaking and can almost hear her breathing" (xii). In this statement, Burgos-Debray achieves her own form of

memory transfer by recognizing the power of the live, spoken, embodied aspect of testimony that she experienced in the room with Menchú and hopes to transmit to the reader. In addition to re-organizing the text into a specific chronology, she corrected grammatical errors in her Spanish so that Menchú wouldn't look "picturesque" (xx-xxi). By constructing a narrative that would be taken seriously by an international audience, she demonstrates her commitment to facilitate the human rights plea inherent in Menchú's testimony.

Burgos-Debray also describes the way in which the oral form of Menchú's testimony interacted with and influenced the structure of the written text. She explains that Menchú's oral form disrupted and changed Burgos-Debray's original "schematic outline" so that it highlighted indigenous cultural practices (Burgos-Debray xix). She shows deep insight into Menchú's purpose in giving the testimony, stating that she "not only... wanted to tell us about her sufferings but also... wanted us to hear about a culture of which she is extremely proud and... wants to have recognized" (xx). This creates a narrative structure that combines personal and political events with indigenous cultural beliefs and practices, reflecting the spiritual-political blend of Mayan Marxism that motivated Q'eqchi' activism (Grandin 120). This is reflected in Q'eqchi' oral history ceremonies as well, which use culture and spirituality to understand present injustices.

Menchú's description of Q'eqchi' intergenerational memory transmission reveals the value of combining this indigenous tradition with the dominant written form. In describing the Q'eqchi' marriage ceremonies, Menchú explains the role of grandparents in telling the couple "many things that [the grandparents have] been witness to, things which must be passed on by their children." Most of the oral history they pass on affirms indigenous identity and distinguishes it from the evil brought by the "White Man," such as asserting that the "White Man [is to blame] for coming and teaching [them] how to kill" (68). This dual affirmation of their own culture and distinction from the "White Man" is reflected in Menchú's testimony, which frequently differentiates between the practices of the Q'eqchi' and the *ladinos*,² a different ethnic group that makes up the majority of the higher economic class and who are the main actors of oppression. For instance, she states that after being terrorized out

2 In Guatemala, *ladino* is used to refer to people from Spanish or mixed descent who often identify with Western customs and values (Matthew).

of her home as a child, she "saw why we said that *ladinos* were thieves, criminals, and liars. It was as our parents had told us... They killed our animals... To us, killing an animal is like killing a person" (106). By connecting the Guatemalan Civil War to repeated destructive exploitation by the white colonial elite, she demonstrates the function of cultural memory in identifying the root causes of seemingly isolated events.³ As a text of cultural memory, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* possesses the radical political power to bring truth to issues of human rights, justice, and accountability.

In addition to transmitting cultural knowledge, Menchú notes that these acts of memory transfer have the additional purpose of "unburden[ing the person] about what they have lived through" (68). This combination of political action and psychological healing is reflected in Menchú's testimony. By creating her authentic language of resistance, she works against the trauma of state terror, in which survivors "refuse to bear witness" and show "silence, inexpressiveness, inhibition, and self-censorship" (Hollander "The Culture" 123, 125). Like the therapy sessions that aided victims of dictatorial violence in Argentina, the testimony helped her to "develop a language to articulate [her] experience of terror" (97). Furthermore, the wide international readership of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* mirrors the strategy of human rights activists in Chile, who taped therapy sessions during Pinochet's dictatorship and circulated them to international human rights organizations abroad. These strategies demonstrate the power of personal, emotional language in garnering international support against human rights violations (146).

Unlike historical textbooks stating deaths in numerical form, the language Menchú uses to describe the deaths of her mother, brother, father, and others is detailed and visceral, not only describing the violent deaths, but also the stench of the aftermath. This shocking corporal imagery forces the reader to psychologically presence the traumas, evoking empathy and horror. One of the most disturbing stories is the description of the death of Doña Petrona Chona, who was hacked into twenty pieces by a machete after refusing to have sex with one of the landowner's sons (150-152). The description of her violent death and

3 For a more in-depth analysis, Greg Grandin's *The Last Colonial Massacre* provides an excellent historical examination of the root causes of the Guatemalan Civil War (2004).

the way in which they had to “collect Doña Petrona up in baskets...her hands, her head, every bit of her all cut off,” is chilling (152). By imaging these bodies, Menchú confronts the reader with corporeal, fleshy details, refusing to efface the real consequences suffered by the victims and survivors of political violence.

Menchú’s testimony ends with a reminder of the motivation behind her cause, which she emphasizes was “born out of wretchedness and bitterness...radicalized by poverty...by the malnutrition which I, as an Indian have seen and experienced...by the exploitation and discrimination...and by the oppression which...shows no respect for our way of life, the way we are” (247). Her concluding remarks reflect her political and personal intentions for adopting the hybrid testimonial genre as a way for her to “unburden” herself from the trauma she experienced and to use it productively to gain international attention and support for indigenous resistance. The construction and impact of her testimony provokes interesting and ongoing questions about the relationship between language, power, and memory in indigenous resistance against economic imperialism. How many more new languages must indigenous communities form before being recognized, respected, and heard?

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