I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala Study Guide

I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala by Rigoberta Menchú

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Introduction

When Menchú's autobiography was first published in 1984, it catapulted her and her story, describing the exploitation and mistreatment of her people, to the forefront of international attention. The book imbued her work in organizing the Guatemalan peasantry with added authority and credibility. The voice of the Guatemalan peasants, which had been heretofore silenced by government oppression, illiteracy, and linguistic barriers, was now available to the global public, and Menchú's narrative encompassed the story of oppressed people everywhere. Critics alleged that parts of Menchú's story were exaggerated or untrue, some even pursuing years of fieldwork to prove their allegations. Supporters have insisted that the verisimilitude of her story extends from the commonality of her experience with that of other Guatemalan peasants, in fact, most Guatemalan peasants. Menchú eloquently delineates the conflicts between ladinos and Indians, landowners and peasants, the government and the resistance, men and women, and change and tradition.

Author Biography

In this autobiography, Rigoberta Menchú details the two stages of her life: before political organizing, and after. Because she was born into a life of varied suffering and extreme poverty, and because hunger and crippling labor were constants, she was always conscious of the repercussions of Guatemalan politics in her personal life.

Every year of her childhood was divided between her home in the *Altiplano*, where Indians cultivated their own land and made every attempt to live as their ancestors had, and the coast, where the *fincas* were located. For most of each year, her family would leave the *Altiplano* and go down to the *fincas*, or plantations, on the coast, and endure inhumane work and living conditions picking cotton or coffee. Many children accompanied their families to the *fincas*, and many of the younger ones died of malnutrition or disease.

It is when Menchú becomes a worker in the *finca* at the age of eight that she experiences the true magnitude of the exploitation by the landowners. Indian workers always incurred debt at the plantation's cantina, pharmacy, and general store, so Menchú's family would sometimes leave the *finca* at the end of eight months with little or no money to show for their work. Simultaneously, what little land the Indians had managed to cultivate successfully in the mountains was constantly being seized by the government, or by landowners with government ties.

Menchú's community had always impressed upon her the importance of maintaining the ways of their ancestors, and they saw the encroachment of *ladino* as a direct threat to their way of life. Menchú saw, quite readily, the discrimination suffered by her people, and the divisive measures employed by the *ladino* society to keep the different Indian groups separate, so that the Indians, who were the majority population in Guatemala, could not unite and resist the discrimination and exploitation. Her growing awareness about this dire situation sparked her entry into activism, and she risked her life to organize the peasants against this abuse.

Menchú's father, Vincente Menchú, a leader in their Indian community, was also well aware of this exploitation, and worked most of his life to improve working and living conditions; he, his wife, and his son were brutally killed by the government for their activism. Menchú left Guatemala for a short period, when her own life was most in danger, but she ultimately returned to continue her resistance work. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. She used some of the money accompanying the prize to establish a foundation in honor of her father, and continues to travel and write extensively, speaking out against social injustice. In 1998 she published a sequel to her autobiography, titled *Crossing Borders*.

Plot Summary

From the time she begins working on the *finca* at age eight, Menchú sees that the position of Indian workers is beyond grim. Workers make the long journey to the plantation by truck; because they are covered with a tarp, and not permitted to get out during any stops, the smell of human and animal excrement is unbearable. A large lean-to made of branches with one crude outdoor toilet is meant to serve four hundred or more workers. The landowners find various ways to cheat the workers, by changing quotas or charging exorbitant prices at the plantation cantina, where many workers would go to drink away their suffering. Landowners spray pesticides on the fields while workers are present; one of Menchú's friends dies as a result, one of many who is killed by pesticide poisoning.

One year, on the *finca*, her youngest brother dies, and her mother is faced with going into debt to bury him on plantation grounds, or waiting until they return to the *Altiplano*; she elects to go into debt and bury him right away, as Indian custom demands, and the other workers provide what they can to help Menchú's family. Menchú recalls, "Those fifteen days working on the *finca* was one of my earliest experiences and I remember it with enormous hatred. That hatred has stayed with me until today." When the family, who had been scattered among various *fincas*, reunites at their home in the *Altiplano*, the news of her brother's death is the greeting Menchú and her mother bring.

When she is almost thirteen, Menchú becomes a maid in Guatemala City, the capital. She works with another maid, Candelaria, an Indian who has become "ladinized," that is, she has learned Spanish and abandoned some of her Indian ways. Nonetheless, Cande, as she is called, is kind to Menchú and helps her learn her duties, and also shows Menchú how to stand up to the mistress, who is a petty, demanding woman. During her time as a maid, Menchú witnesses the full force and cruelty of *ladino* discrimination against Indians; Menchú sees that the dog is fed better than she, that Cande is given a bed while she must sleep on the floor. Fearful of losing her ties with her family, and unable to contain her anger at the way she is treated, Menchú leaves. When she returns home, she learns that her father has been imprisoned for resisting the government's takeover of Indian land. Given that illiterate Indians have virtually no recourse in the justice system, it takes a combination of superhuman effort and luck to get him out.

In 1967, Menchú's village in the *Altiplano* is "repressed" by the army for the first time. When land cultivated for years by Indians finally began to produce, landowners appeared, ransacked the village, and forced the Indians out. Government authorities, in collusion with the landowners, took advantage of the Indian's illiteracy by coaxing them to sign documents which the authorities claimed gave Indians the deed to the land. In reality, the documents stated that the Indians would be allowed to remain on the land for two years, after which they must move to another area. It is during these early conflicts with the landowners and the government that Menchú discovers the power of language, and the multiple ways that Indians are cheated, divided, and abused because of their illiteracy. She vows to learn Spanish, which she knows is, in many ways, a break with

her community, since in learning Spanish, she will learn many other ways of *ladinos*. It is also at this time that the CUC is created□the Comité Unidad de Campesina, or the United Peasants Committee. Both Menchú and her family are active leaders of the CUC at different points in its history.

The government's next step is to disrupt the communal structure of Indian village life by giving each Indian family a parcel of land, too small to cultivate efficiently. The Indians resist, and combine their parcels into a common area, divided into cultivated land and living areas for all. Since Menchú's parents had long been the leaders of their community, they are elected to live in the center, with others surrounding them. The government's response to this resistance is to send in soldiers to break up the villages by force; the soldiers, some of them recruited Indians, engage in mass looting, murders, rape, and torture. Menchú's community decides to defend itself by placing booby-traps all around the village, and they are successful, even managing to capture one of the soldiers. In accordance with their respect for human life, they do not kill the solider, but impress upon him how wrong his actions are, and beseech him to tell his comrades the same. After this success, Menchú travels to nearby villages and organizes them in a similar way.

One of Menchú's earliest experiences with organizing was facilitating Bible study meetings in her community, which was largely Christian, thanks to the influence of Catholic Action, a religious organization started in 1945 to spread Catholic doctrine among the Indians. Menchú explains that Indians took to Catholicism readily because the Bible and Indian culture had many elements in common, such as veneration of ancestors, expression of thanks to a God, and the promise of a better afterlife for suffering endured on earth. Once she decides to learn Spanish in order to better organize the peasant population, Menchú receives most of her tutelage from sympathetic priests. She does recognize, however, that there are two Catholic churches in Guatemala: the church of hierarchy, which turns a blind eye to the Indians' plight, teaching Indians to be passive and accept "God's will," and the church of the poor, which actively joins the struggle, with priests and nuns risking their lives in the same way, for the same cause.

As Menchú and her family become more active in the CUC's resistance activities, they become wanted by the government. Menchú's younger brother is kidnapped and brutally tortured by the military, and her family is called to watch him and other prisoners be burned alive. If they refuse, they would be arrested as accomplices. After the death of her brother, Menchú's father, as part of a mass protest, occupies the Spanish embassy, where they are killed when troops set fire to the building. Menchú's mother is captured, raped, tortured, and left to die of exposure on a hilltop, her open wounds infected and suppurating. Her body is guarded by soldiers, to ensure that no one comes to save her or claim the body; they guard the corpse until it completely disintegrates.

Ultimately, Menchú renounces marriage and motherhood, for several reasons. Although she acknowledges that having children is natural, and that family planning is another abomination placed on Indians by the *ladino* society, she cannot bear the thought of bringing children into the world who will suffer as she has. Also, she knows that her

work will be limited by having children, and while many men in the organizing movement are very enlightened about their common plight, that many are also trapped in the chauvinist ways of thinking which place men above women.

Forced to go into hiding after the death of her mother, Menchú barely avoids capture while hiding in a church. She works briefly for a group of nuns at a convent, until she learns that they are often visited by a member of the secret police. She escapes to Mexico with the help of non-peasant members of the resistance movement, and is reunited with her four sisters. She rejects the offer of European supporters to go to Europe, and returns to Guatemala, where she begins to work as an organizer for the Vincente Menchú Revolutionary Christians, a group formed in memory of her father, an unceasing activist and devout Christian.

Characters

Candelaria

Candelaria is the "ladinized" Indian maid with whom Menchú works in the city. Cande is unimpressed by the mistress' fits and threats, and stands up to her without hesitation. She even plans a small rebellion in the house, to annoy the mistress, but is thrown out when her plot is discovered. Cande refuses to sleep with the sons of the house, inciting more mistreatment from the mistress, but still, she is able to demand that the mistress give Menchú's father some money when he appears one day, penniless.

Petrona Chona

Doña Petrona Chona is the "first dead body" Menchú had ever seen. She had been hacked to pieces by the landowner's bodyguard because she refused the landowner's son. She was married and had a small son, whose finger was chopped off during the attack.

Petrocinio Menchú Tum

Petrocinio Menchú Tum was Menchú's younger brother, who was kidnapped, tortured, and killed by the army for his organizing work. His family was called to witness his murder by the army; the army lined up all the prisoners, doused them with petrol, and lit them on fire as their families watched. He was Menchú's second brother to die.

Juana Menchú

A community leader alongside her husband, Juana Menchú was a woman of varied talents; in addition to running an ever-growing household in strict accordance with Indian customs, she was immensely knowledgeable about natural medicines, and her services as a healer and midwife called her away from home much of the time. Menchú admits that because of her patience and resourcefulness, her mother was the one "who coped with the big problems in our family." Also an activist in the peasant's struggle, she is ultimately captured by the military and tortured in unspeakable ways, and dies an agonizing death.

Rigoberta Menchú

Menchú describes herself as "shy, timid," during her younger years. She was her father's favorite, and her father's staunchest supporter, sympathizing with his need to drink to drown his overwhelming sorrows. As for her mother, she regrets not having taken the time to learn as much from her mother as she did from her father, particularly

when, after the death of her mother, she notes that women bear most of the suffering of families, and know the most secrets. Perhaps due to the influence of her parents, who were leaders of the community and wholly Indian to the core, Menchú also becomes a leader in both the Christian and peasant organizations without sacrificing her Indian beliefs. She does, however, consciously decide not to be married or become a mother, identities which are integral to womanhood in the Indian culture; she decides, with difficulty, that her mission to work for social justice is one which cannot accommodate the challenges of motherhood. She is a tenacious and intelligent figure, able to learn Spanish without formal schooling, without being able to read or write. Her narration of her story is replete with an understanding of political struggle: why barriers exist between people, what fuels injustice and exploitation, what will precipitate change. She is astute enough to look at Catholicism critically, although she is a devout Christian, and select those elements of Christianity that will help her struggle and which will not. Her courage and unceasing stamina allow her to organize other villages on her own, to venture into the city at the age of twelve to work as maid, and to risk her life organizing all peasants, *ladino* and Indian, as a leader in the CUC.

Vincente Menchú

Orphaned as a teenager, Vincente Menchú is the driving force behind the village's resistance. In the army, he learned "a lot of bad things, but he also learned to be a man." He was often away from the house, petitioning government authorities, organizing workers, or imprisoned, but he was Menchú's favorite, and she his. He is killed while occupying the Spanish Embassy, when troops set fire to the building. He was very intent on teaching his children to fight, as he had been taught, and passes down the ideology of cultural pride and resistance.

The Mistress

The *ladino* who employs Menchú as a maid, the mistress is a symbolic representation of all *ladinos* who discriminate and oppress Indians. Her appallingly unfair treatment of Menchú is Menchú's wakeup call to the true nature of racist *ladinos*.

Themes

Community

The book contains detailed descriptions of Quiché Indian ceremonies, traditions, and customs, which Menchú gives in order to explain the profound sense of community which fuels Indian village and family life. The village is an extension of the family, and all previous generations are represented in the village through remembrances of ancestors and their ways.

The ceremonies for childbirth, marriage, and death all emphasize the importance of community involvement. A pregnant woman is given all the comforts and attention that the village can afford, and the birth itself is one of the rare occasions when the village will kill an animal to celebrate. Indians engage in intricate ceremonies to ask the earth's permission before sowing and harvesting; it is considered blasphemous to abuse the land, when the earth is the mother and father of all that exists upon it. Marriage is undertaken only after an elaborate series of visits by the prospective groom and his parents to the bride's family; the bride makes the ultimate decision. Even after marriage, if the situation becomes untenable, the bride can leave her husband and his family and return to her village, where the community will care for her, feeding her out of a communal surplus which she, in turn, contributes to with her labor. For death rituals, the community, not the family of the dead, bears all the expenses of the burial. It is one of few occasions when flowers are cut, to be placed around the coffin. Before his death, an Indian will offer his secrets to one chosen person, and all of his advice and his recommendations to his family. Menchú says, "We can only love a person who eats what we eat," explaining that when encountering non-Indians, the willingness to accept Indian ways is a crucial sign of empathy.

One other significant aspect of all these rituals, which has developed since the appearance of the *ladino*, is the pact that all Indians make at certain milestones (birth, ten years of age, marriage) to uphold and maintain the ways of their ancestors and to "destroy the wicked lessons we were taught by [the White Man]," since "if they hadn't come, we would all be united, equal, and our children would not suffer." Even these century-old ceremonies have adapted to include not only an acknowledgment of the Indian's history, but a call to consciousness of the Indian's present situation at the hands of ladinos, and a promise to battle the forces which endeavor to corrupt Indian ways.

Language and Literacy

Menchú's community has an oral tradition through which they pass information about traditions and history from one generation to the next. Because of the variety of language spoken among the larger Indian population, however, Menchú finds that Indians cannot communicate with one another, despite their similar circumstances. Menchú's family is afraid that she will acquire other undesirable *ladino* traits if she

learns Spanish, but *ladinos* have kept Indians from learning Spanish anyway, by keeping them out of their homes and schools. Menchú learns how disempowering it is not to be literate, particularly in Spanish, when her family is cheated into signing documents they did not understand, which ultimately left them landless. The chapter where Menchú describes her decision to learn Spanish to organize peasants more effectively is titled "Farewell to the Community: Rigoberta decides to learn Spanish." Her decision is based on the logic that "Since Spanish was a language which united us, why learn all the twentytwo languages in Guatemala?. . .I learned Spanish out of necessity."

Natural World

Menchú refers to the earth as "the mother of man," because she "gives him food." Animals, water, and maize are considered pure and sacred, and are often invoked in prayer. Menchú also notes that "they" call the Indians polytheistic because they acknowledge the God of water, the earth, and the son, but she explains that all are expressions of the one God, "the heart of the sky." All life originates with this one God, and for that reason, Indians promise to respect all life, killing neither trees, plants nor animals without good cause or first asking permission to do so from the earth. Even when the Indians begin to organize the villages to protect themselves from the army, they ask the "Lord of the natural world, the one God," for permission "to use his creations of nature to defend" themselves. For this reason, the indiscriminate killing of people and animals by the army is still more shocking to the Indians.

When Catholic Action began to spread the Christian doctrine among the Indians in 1945, the Indians willingly accepted it as not a discrete religion, but another means through which to express their existing indigenous beliefs and practices, such as prayer. Menchú delineates the similarities between Catholicism and Indian beliefs: "it confirms our belief that, yes, there is a God, and yes, there is a father for all of us. . .we believe we have ancestors, and that these ancestors are important. . .the Bible talks about forefathers too. . .We drew a parallel [between Christ] and our king, Tecũn; Umãn, who was defeated and persecuted by the Spaniards." Later, Menchú finds that the Indians can use the Bible as a weapon in the struggle for social justice, observing that the Kingdom of God where all humans are equal should be created here on earth, despite some teachings of the Church that compel Indians to be passive and accept "God's will."

Migration and Dislocation

Movement and relocation are the two primary modes for Indian living conditions, since Indian families can only spend a third of the year cultivating their own land at home in the *Altiplano*, spending most of the year away at the *finca*. When traveling to the *finca*, Indians attempt to replicate a sense of home by bringing their animals, utensils, and other small possessions, although doing so makes the long journey by truck uncomfortable and sometimes unbearable. The dislocation is underscored by the fact that Indians are covered by a tarp while traveling, making it impossible to see the

countryside they cross. Furthermore, when the government begins to force Indians off their own communally developed land and onto individual parcels or uncultivated land, it exacerbates the sense of dislocation by forbidding the use of basic natural resources that are critical to the Indians survival, such as trees. The Guatemalan Forestry Commission begins to require advance permission for cutting down trees, and when permission is granted, charges the Indians exorbitantly for them, although corporations are seen freely cutting down hundreds of trees for business use.

Style

Setting

Menchú's story begins with the story of her parents, her orphaned father and her abandoned mother, who both matured under the same impoverished conditions as Menchú herself. In her narration, Menchú takes the reader from the dreadful conditions of the *finca* to the difficult but fulfilling communal life.

Point of View

The book is written in first person, from the point of view of Menchú, who has learned to speak Spanish through immersion. She is in her early twenties when she dictates her story to ethnographer Burgos-Debray, and she describes not only her life story, but the stories of her father and mother, other villages, and the evolution of the CUC (The United Peasants Committee).

Symbolism

There are two salient symbols which Menchú weaves through her narrative: maize and talk. Maize (corn) is the center of the Indian economy; they eat, sell, and feed their animals with maize. They hold elaborate ceremonies before the first yearly harvest of maize. Childbirth ceremonies reaffirm that humans are made of maize, and how the essence of humans can be found in maize. Maize is the lifeblood of the Quiché Indian culture.

Talk is another important representation of Quiché culture; it is through talk, spoken language, that those near death pass on their recommendations and secrets, and it is through talk that young people and newlyweds reiterate their commitment to the community and its ways. It is the inability to talk to one another that keeps the different Indian ethnicities from uniting effectively against their common oppressors, the *ladino* landowners and government. When tortured by the army, Indians have their tongues cut or split, so they will not be able to talk of the atrocities they have suffered, or pass along warnings and true stories of brutality.

Historical Context

When Guatemala's economy changed from an agrarian economy to an trade economy based on coffee in the late 1800s, the government needed more and more land on which to grow this lucrative cash crop. To satisfy its need for land, the government employed a strategy known as "land grabs," whereby arable land was forcibly taken from Indian villages and used to grow coffee and other cash crops. Because coffee was labor intensive to process, the government began to pressure Indian communities to work on plantations, as Pratt explains, by "passing a 'vagrancy law' requiring all landless peasants to work for at least 150 days per year for either the *fincas* or the state." This law, in conjunction with the military's takeover of Indian land (thereby rendering Indians "landless" in the eyes of the law), is the reason why Menchú's family and so many others had to migrate to the coast for most of every year to work on the *fincas*.

A new government came into power in 1944, beginning a period known as the "Ten Years of Spring," with Arbenz as president. Labor and land laws were modified to favor peasants' rights, land was taken from corporations and redistributed back to peasants. Unfortunately for the peasants, the largest corporate landowner was United Fruit Company, a U.S.-owned conglomerate, who cried foul and "Communism" back in the States, which was experiencing the McCarthy anti-Communist juggernaut; United Fruit had a monopoly on fruit exports from Guatemala, and it "stood to lose 400,000 acres," in the land redistribution, according to Pratt. The Arbenz government was overthrown in a U.S.-backed military coup in 1954, part of the United States' worldwide anti-Communism campaign, and was replaced by a military dictatorship.

Organizers such as Menchú and her family members, and Indians in general, because of their communal ways and organizing work, were labeled as Communists and became government targets nearly overnight. It was during the period of authoritarian rule following Arbenz' administration that the "land grabs" were in full force; peasant lands were once again forcibly reappropriated and peasant resistance crushed. The guerrilla movement developed in response to the government's brutal tactics, in tandem with a groundswell of grassroots organizing, such as literacy campaigns, farming cooperatives, and health initiatives for the poor. The government responded to guerrilla reprisals by organizing death squads, such as the notorious "La Mano Blanco," or the White Hand. During a peaceful occupation of the Spanish Embassy, against the protests of the Spanish ambassador, the army set fire to the building, killing all but one protester, including Menchú's father.

An irony is that the *finca* system actually brought groups of Indians into contact, a gathering which would have been difficult otherwise, given the remoteness of most Indian villages. Indians from different groups were able to meet and compare experiences and, eventually, communicate and organize. Perhaps one of the largest triumphs of the resistance was the coalition established between *ladino* peasants and Indians, manifested during the strike of over 75,000 workers in 1980. It was a coalition which could only develop when racist, classist, and linguistic barriers were finally minimized.

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Literary Heritage

I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala has a dual literary heritage, descending from ancient Mayan/Quiché Indian culture and shaped by modern Guatemalan social forces. As a spoken narrative which was transcribed and put into print by ethnographer Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, and translated into English by Ann Wright, Menchú's story was left virtually intact the way it was narrated. The act of telling her life story, replete with recommendations, explanations, as well as concealed information, is one of *testimonio*, a form common to Indian culture. Testimonio, or testimony, is, according to Zimmerman, "a culminating life act," and Menchú's testimonio is "like that of one who is going to die." In describing the funeral ceremonies in the Indian community, Menchú notes that before death, the dying will call his family to him and "tells them his secrets, and advises them how to act in life, towards the Indian community, and towards the *ladino*. That is, everything that is handed down through the generations to preserve Indian culture." Essentially, that is what the peasants struggle is as well: a persistent attempt to preserve Indian culture, their way of life, in the face of *ladino* encroachment. The purpose of Menchú's narration is not only to describe this struggle, but to be a part of it.

During times of crisis, Zimmerman notes that writers evolve new forms of expression, and in Guatemala, this new form embraced the use of metonymy, using one entity to represent other things associated with it. Menchú acknowledges right away, on the first page, that her story "is the story of all poor Guatemalans." Although it seems impossible, her story is the story of all Guatemalans, not only through the use of metonymy, but accumulation. Just as the recommendations of the dying integrate the story of his life and the advice of all those who came before him, Menchú's story encompasses not only her family's life but the lives of all families like hers.

In *Teaching and Testimony*, Arata describes a "flexibility of expression" which was a "crucial part of Mayan resiliency," facilitating their survival through centuries of invasion, oppression, and hardship. Arata contends that this "ability to adapt without giving up what is most important provides a continuity through change," a statement which further clarifies how Menchú's people have managed to remain so consistent and true to the ways of their ancestors despite the relentless modernization going on around them. It is also true of the structure of her story, which is fluid, moving seamlessly between a chronological narration of events to detailed descriptions of Indian customs. Burgos-Debray explains that she left all the parts of Menchú's story in the order that it was told, despite worries that it might be confusing or boring to the reader; her editorial decision preserved the fluid, flexible structure of Menchú's narrative which places it so firmly not only in her native oral tradition, but her cultural imperatives.

Critical Overview

Menchú's autobiography has been attacked by critics for being an "inauthentic" text. Critics charge that there has been "interference" from editor and ethnographer Burgos-Debray, who interviewed Menchú, or that Menchú herself exaggerated or fabricated parts of her story to make it more dramatic. One of Menchú's earliest and most vocal critics, Dinesh D'Souza, former editor of the conservative college paper the *Dartmouth Review* and author of *Illiberal Education*, questioned the veracity of Menchú's status as an impoverished victim of centuries- old discrimination, exploited by corrupt landowners. He offers her vocabulary, her later travels, and her conversion to Catholicism as dubious proof of her victimization. David Stoll, a professor at Middlebury College in Vermont, conducted years of fieldwork in Guatemala and claims to have found people whose recollections of events described by Menchú differ greatly from hers. He asserts that the truth about Guatemalan politics at that time was far less extreme and polarized than Menchú suggests, and that "the people" were more ambivalent about which side—the guerrillas or the government—to believe.

Advocates of Menchú's counter that the structure and content of Menchú's story are both accurate and typical of the period during which Menchú matures and tells her story. Zimmerman argues that in a "crisis period" such as that of the 1960s-1980s in Guatemala, that writers create "new forms representing new perspectives. . .each. . .straining to express. . .the social whole," such as the form created in Menchú's autobiography. Menchú explains herself, on the first page, that her story is the story of all poor Guatemalans: "My personal experience is the reality of a whole people." Menchú's supporters contend that it is not the sheer veracity of her facts that determines the value of her story in a politicalsocial context, but that the verisimilitude of the Guatemalan peasant experience is revealed, made accessible, and honored.

Zimmerman, and others, note that Menchú does not use metaphor to develop her descriptions, but metonymy. Metonymy is a literary device which uses the name of one entity to represent the idea of all other entities associated with it. In reference to Menchú's story, that means Menchú's story, and her name, invoke the story and names of all other poor peasants. Her use of the pronoun "I," Zimmerman reasons, "is imbedded and absolutely tied to a 'we.'" In this sense, Menchú's supporters are not acknowledging and excusing falsehoods in her story, but asserting that an inconsistency or contradiction in her story does not render it an inauthentic or unimportant text, because in the balance, it tells the true story of poor Guatemalan peasants who were, in fact, exploited, tortured, and killed.

Another critical aspect of Menchú's story is the method through which it came to print. This book requires an unusual definition of authorship; is the author the person who tells the story, or the one who writes it down? Burgos-Debray, the editor of Menchú's story, assures the reader in her introduction that the narrative that Menchú relayed orally was not altered in the slightest. This book has a special status as literature, spoken narrative, autobiography, and historical text, since it is the true-life story of Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché Indian woman. Menchú did not actually put pen to paper to write the

book; it is the unabridged transcription of her story, which she told in Spanish, to ethnographer Elisabeth Burgos-Debray over the period of a week. (An ethnographer, simply put, is someone who studies other cultures.) Burgos-Debray recorded Menchú's story, transcribed it, organized it, and put the words in print, in Spanish. That book was then translated into English by Ann Wright. The exact words and the flow of the story are Rigoberta Menchú's, but others put her story into book form.

As the book is essentially the printed version of an oral narration, theorists have placed Menchú's autobiography in the genre of "testimonio," or testimony, an oral form prevalent in Quiché culture, and a literary form common in Latin American literature, whether printed or oral.

Criticism

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Critical Essay #1

Lydia Kim is a teacher of world history and English literature at Cary Academy in Cary, North Carolina. In the following essay, she explains how the testimonial nature of I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala *makes it difficult to judge, or even categorize, the book by Western standards of literature, including those of autobiography and biography.*

Although *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is classified as autobiography, it is, in many ways, inaccurate to call the book an autobiography or a memoir, because those texts are written largely for purposes of recalling and celebrating a life, whereas Menchú told her story for the purposes of informing a larger public about human rights abuses in Guatemala. It is precisely that designation as autobiography, however, which has caused so much controversy about the veracity of her story. Critics of Menchú have alleged that Menchú includes many falsehoods and exaggerations throughout her story, events which did not occur at all or transpired differently. Her supporters contend that even if every detail of her story was not witnessed by Menchú, as a verbal account in both the oral tradition of Quiché Indians and its more recent permutation into *testimonio*, that her story cannot be judged by conventional standards of autobiography, since it was not written with the same intention or by familiar methods. Menchú's story retains its value not as autobiographical literature, but as a singular voice for thousands of silenced Guatemalans.

Her critics further allege that her claims to being a poor, uneducated Quiché Indian woman, the child of impoverished Indian peasants, are also false. They assert that she was actually the daughter of an Indian landowner, and the recipient of extended schooling well into her adolescent years. David Stoll, a professor at Middlebury College, published a book in 1998 titled *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* in which he disputes Menchú's claims that she had no formal schooling, that a brother of hers died of starvation as a child, and that another brother was murdered, burned to death before her eyes after being tortured. He claims to have found eyewitnesses who recall the situations differently. CNN.com reported on December 15, 1998, that the *New York Times* had also found such eyewitnesses who recall events differently. They assert that the land dispute Menchú details in her book as a twenty-two-year struggle between her father and *ladino* landowners was in fact a dispute between her father and his in-laws. Stoll claims that most peasants were far more ambivalent about making allegiances, given their options: the brutal and unjust Guatemalan government, or the violent and unforgiving guerilla movement. Stoll claims he is not out to debunk or delegitimize Menchú, but that he is concerned about the political momentum created by what may be a falsified story, momentum which led to Menchú being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

Menchú has explained these inconsistencies with a combination of cultural background and political imperative. In a response reported on CNN.com on January 21, 1999, Menchú stated, "I still haven't written my autobiography. . .what you have is a testimonial." She counters reports that there was no brother who died of starvation on

the *finca* by explaining that Indian families often give the same name to more than one child; in her family there was a Nicolas I and Nicolas II. She also chides Stoll, saying that as the expert, he should have known that. She confirms that she did participate in literacy classes run by nuns at a Catholic boarding school, but that she was there as a maid, not a student. Stoll, for his part, insists he never called Menchú a liar, but that as "[t]he book expresses 500 years of Native American experience in the eyes of a woman born in 1959. . .It can't be a literal truth." Given that he believes this, it is baffling that he would spend ten years trying to find and substantiate falsehoods in Menchú's account.

Menchú narrated her story in a tradition that is both centuries old and shaped by modern forces. Her Quiché Indian heritage relies heavily on oral tradition to pass precepts, information, morals, and history from one generation to the next. As a twentieth- century Guatemalan peasant, her story is also told in the ritual manner of *testimonio*, or testimony, a form which is common in modern Latin American narratives. In both, there is a sense of shared history to be recounted, a collective memory and experience which any narrator adds to when telling his or her story. Menchú's *testimonio* is replete with recommendations, explanations, as well as secrets; it is, according to Zimmerman, "a culminating life act," which aggregates the experiences of many Guatemalans into one narrative. Her use of the pronoun "I," Zimmerman explains, "is imbedded and absolutely tied to a 'we.'" In a CNN report from February 12, 1999, Menchú declared, "The book that is being questioned is a testimonial that mixes my personal testimony and the testimony of what happened in Guatemala. . .The book that is being questioned is not my biography." Menchú agrees and acknowledges that the book is not her biography; indeed it was never intended to be read as a biography or autobiography. In Indian (and to some extent, Latin American) culture no one's story exists in an individualized vacuum, distinct from this collective memory and experience.

The purpose of Menchú's *testimonio* is twofold: to inform the global community about the plight of her people, and to be of service to her people by being their voice. In her book *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro- American Woman Novelist*, Hazel Carby describes a similar process undertaken by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a black female writer in the crisis period of post-Reconstruction, in writing her novel *Iola Leroy*. Addressing the horrors of slavery and its effects, Harper writes passages which "shift from the individual experiences of her character to the experience of a race." Harper undertakes an endeavor similar to Menchú's in attempting to give voice to her community, previously silenced by exclusion from the government and the press, as well as from language and literacy acquisition.

This is not to say that lies are acceptable if the text is written for purposes of political persuasion or enlightenment, but Menchú does counter and explain each of Stoll's charges. Menchú affirms, on the first page, "This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book, and I didn't learn it alone." This statement underscores the fact that her testimony was *learned*, both from other people, and from her own experience, not something which merely happened that she is now just retelling. As reported on CNN.com on February 12, 1999, she asked a New York audience to read her book and "focus attention on the need to investigate and prosecute massacres, kidnappings, and

widespread torture during Guatemala's 36-year civil war." Her supporters contend that detailed authenticity does not determine the worthiness of Menchú's activism.

Since Western academic categories do not recognize *testimonio* as a familiar narrative form, Menchú's book is erroneously categorized as autobiography. But why apply standards of accuracy, plot development, or narrative form of autobiography to a form which is inherently different in purpose and heritage? Western-style autobiography attempts to dramatize one's life story so that the reader may vicariously experience or genuinely empathize with the events in others' lives. *Testimonio* seeks to accumulate and recount one's own experiences and those of one's community, in order to enlighten and provoke others to action. Stoll's and other's challenges to Menchú's *testimonio*, even if proven true, will not mitigate her status as a Nobel Prize laureate, or her international prominence as a human rights activist. The implication that the mere taint of fiction should diminish the credibility of Menchú's story and her purpose is clearly a political argument, one which denies the altogether different structure, intent, and history of *testimonio* and oral tradition, its standing as a widespread cultural practice, and its legitimacy in Menchú's cultural sphere.

Is the point, then, to discredit Menchú's book as literature, thereby rendering it unfit for use in the classroom? If so, one must return to the point that Menchú's book does not fit neatly into the category of autobiography and its dramatic requirements of a captivating plot, well-developed characters, and handily resolved conflicts. Her story is a testimony of events which occurred in Guatemala, events which she wanted to bring to the world's attention for purposes of ending the suffering and exploitation of her people. Menchú's story does not make use of literary conventions that Western readers are accustomed to, expressly because hers is a "resistant literature." She does not want the reader to identify with her, like a sympathetic character in a novel, but to listen to her; she keeps the reader at a distance, rather than develop her character in the book and invite the reader to have complete empathy. As Ann Wright, the translator of Menchú's book, puts it, "Her words want us to understand and react." The book is not recognizably canonical, but it can, however, play an important part in classes where the purpose is to investigate and analyze oral history and political narratives.

In addition, readers of the translated English version are reading a text which is, in Moneyhun's words, "several times removed from whatever we might recognize as Menchú's 'real world,'" because translation is not "simply a negotiation between language but between mind sets and world views." So critics who challenge and denounce Menchú for inconsistencies in her story are doing so based on a text which is not in its original, authentic form. Menchú told her story to ethnographer Elizabeth Burgos-Debray over the course of a week, who then transcribed it and put it into print in Spanish; that Spanish print version was then translated by Ann Wright. Subsequent to Menchú's oral testimony, the printed version was shaped by Burgos- Debray, although she denies doing so in the introduction, only to contradict herself a paragraph later. Burgos-Debray has her own worldview and literary and linguistic influences, as does translator Ann Wright. It is possible that this process of translating, first into Spanish print and then into English, transforms Menchú's story from *testimonio* to oral history. The difference between oral history and *testimonio*, according to John Beverly, is that

"in oral history, it is the intentionality of the recorder□ usually a social scientist□that is dominant. . .In *testimonio*, it is the intentionality of the narrator that is paramount. . .*testimonio* has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty. . .[a] struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself." In other words, Menchú's story does not have to be entirely hers, nor entirely personally true, for it to be effective, edifying, motivating, or provocative.

Since she is taking advantage of a rare opportunity to be the voice of a previously silenced people, she is responding to the pressure to tell the story of the whole accurately and poignantly. It is not the sheer veracity of her facts that determines the value of her story in a political-social context, but that the truth of the Guatemalan peasant experience is revealed, comprehended, and honored.

Source: Lydia Kim, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Norma Stoltz Chinchilla examines Rigoberta Menchú's autobiography, I, Rigoberta Menchú*), the charges made by author David Stoll that the autobiography is not authentic, and Stoller's assertion that Menchú's actions functioned to prolong the war.*

Long before David Stoll's book appeared and the *New York Times* journalist Larry Rohter (1998) gleefully proclaimed it a definitive expose of Guatemala's only Nobel Prize winner since Miguel Angel Asturias (and the only indigenous female, let alone Guatemalan, to become an international icon), there were articles and interviews purporting to summarize Stoll's argument and his motives for advancing it. From exposure to a few of these I formed my first impressions of his project and was willing to give his motives for devoting ten years of his life to it the benefit of the doubt.

I seriously questioned the timing of a book that would most certainly tarnish the reputation of one of the few objects of international pride Guatemalans have had in the past few decades and worried that its appearance would make an already difficult process of reconciliation more so. But I was willing to concede that Stoll's inquiry, however uncomfortable and disagreeable, might lead to a useful reexamination of the idealizations that inevitably emerge during a war. I was interested in honest discussions of a revolutionary strategy that, in retrospect, had underestimated the power of the enemy and carried such a high cost in human lives, particularly those of indigenous Guatemalans. I knew from experience that complexities, nuances, and contradictions are typically overlooked or go unmentioned in the course of mobilizing support for one or another side in a war or in efforts to stop widespread human rights violations.

If, I reasoned, all Stoll intended to do was to show that Rigoberta's autobiography might have been partly a composite or an oversimplified account, crafted in a historical context that required a certain amount of clandestinity and dissimulation to survive, that could be useful information for those who studied and used oral histories. Again, if it was an account partially shaped by the international audience with whom she was trying to communicate the First World anthropologist to whom she first told her story and later the audiences in the United States whose sympathy with the plight of indigenous peoples, human rights victims, and activists for change she soughtthat might be important to know. Furthermore, different regions of Guatemala had undoubtedly experienced the army, the revolutionary movement, and the violence differently, and reconstruction of events in specific communities could be useful in spite of methodological difficulties such as the fact that many witnesses are dead and survivors tend to shape interpretations to fit those of the victors. Reconstruction of village experiences might be useful even if, as in this case, the villages were not representative of those most sympathetic to the revolutionary movement or those most subject to army retaliation.

Reading the book, however, disabused me of my original generosity about Stoll's agenda and intentions. His aim is to question not only whether Rigoberta Menchu was

an eyewitness to the events she describes and whether the story she tells about her family and community coincides with that of others but whether her testimony is a valid account of how the violence began and whether Indians who sided with the revolutionary movement did so out of conviction or out of pragmatism, fear, and manipulation. He suggests that, in fact, Rigoberta and the solidarity movement promoted a mythical interpretation of the origins of the war and that Rigoberta's telling of "her" story around the world actually prolonged the war.

Critical Essay #3

In Stoll's revisionist version of recent Guatemalan history (one supported by few sources other than army apologists), the real cause of poverty is not conflicts between impoverished peasants, mostly Indian, and landed oligarchy, mostly ladino, but rapid population growth. As he sees it, the primary source of conflict in the countryside is tensions among indigenous peasants over land, and the real cause of genocide is not the systematic implementation of counterinsurgency plans (such as Plan Ixil and President Efrain Rios Montt's Plan Victoria '82, devised in consultation with U.S. military advisers and implemented by military officers trained in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s) (Black, 1984) but the actions of "panicked" soldiers and "a homicidal sector" of the officer corps baited by the guerrillas. The "indiscriminate" massacres of many innocent civilians, in Stoll's view, were an understandable if regrettable response to the strategy of "irregular war," in which combatants and civilians cannot be clearly distinguished. Army and guerrilla violence are roughly equivalent. He never discusses the historical links between Guatemalan army violence and U.S. training and advice and never asks why torture, extrajudicial disappearances, and attacks on unarmed civilians have been hallmarks of counterinsurgency campaigns in Latin American countries without rural insurgencies or why the repression extended to villages with little direct involvement in the revolutionary movement.

In Stoll's version, Guatemalan Indians were recruited to a strategy that had "failed" even before the movement's heyday in the 1970s and the army massacres of the 1980s. He implies that guerrilla leaders knew of the risks involved but failed to give peasants and Indians adequate "consumer protec tion warnings" before joining. Anyone who knows the history of armed revolutionary movements in Latin America knows, however, that the defeat of Che in Bolivia had little to do with the Guatemalan guerrilla movement in the 1980s. Che and his band never managed to get to first base with Bolivian peasants. But Guatemalan revolutionaries incorporated Indian as well as Christian (liberation) philosophy into their theoretical frameworks, learned some of the local languages, spent years studying local conditions, and, unlike Che in Bolivia, recruited successfully from local populations in their areas of greatest strength. One movement was based on the foco guerrilla war strategy and the other on "popular war" more akin to the Vietnam experience (which eventually resulted in independence).

Given the long history of racial/ethnic division, state-sponsored repression, and generalized mistrust in Guatemalan culture, what is extraordinary is the degree of support the revolutionary movement had among rural Indians and ladinos in the 1970s and early 1980s. Not all rural Indians and ladinos, perhaps not even the majority, supported the revolutionary movement. Rarely does any social change movement that has a high degree of risk mobilize a majority of those who are supposed to benefit from it. Nor was there a perfect fit between the goals and dreams of those who supported the movement and those who led it or a homogeneity of motives among the active and passive supporters affiliated with it at different times in different places. There never is. Gaps between the rhetoric and coherent narrative of leaders and the agendas and experiences of followers are a given in social movements, as are exaggerated claims of

representation. But what is undeniable is that, after the victory of the Sandinista revolution in 1979 and prior to the Rios Montt coup that implemented a coherent counterinsurgency strategy and centralized military command in 1982, both the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and revolutionary sympathizers believed that the Guatemalan revolutionary movement was a real contender for power. Through the 1970s, popular (unarmed) movements demanding land, better wages and working conditions, and an end to repression were strong, heterogeneous, and broadly based. It was partly their strength, particularly in indigenous areas, and, later, the threat of an indigenous insurrection, rather than the threat of the guerrillas alone, that caused the army's response.

Thus, the armed revolutionary strategy adopted in the 1970s did not seem doomed then as it may appear to have been today. If, in retrospect, it is important to question whether it was justified, given its human costs, the counterinsurgency capacity of the army, and the international context (particularly the resolve of the United States not to let another Nicaraguan revolution take place in the region), as some former guerrilla strategists and activists themselves have done, it is with the benefit of hindsight. And if the adoption of an armed revolutionary popular-war strategy indeed closed off opportunities for other forms of resistance, this was not evident in the 1970s when organizing within this framework began.

Critical Essay #4

Despite denials, Stoll seems to believe that Indians who joined the revolutionary movement in the 1970s or participated in the beginnings of rural insurrections between 1970 and 1982 (not led or directed by the National Guatemalan Revolutionary Unity [Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca-URNG]) were not really capable of pursuing their own political agenda but were misled or used. Indians, like other poor people, are thus better understood as victims or dupes rather than historical agents. He also seems to believe that the presence of economically better-off rural or urban leaders or intermediaries (priests, nuns, missionaries, university and high school students, middle peasants, etc.) undermines a movement's claims to be fighting poverty, illiteracy, and inequality. More literate and educated people are always catalysts for social movements on behalf of the poor, disenfranchised, and dispossessed. Few social movements would qualify if we removed those led by individuals who came from more literate and economically comfortable backgrounds.

Stoll recognizes that a number of Indians were guerrilla combatants and cadres, including middlelevel leaders, in several revolutionary organizations, but he uses the fact that leaders at the highest levels were ladino to diminish the significance of their participation. While we can and should be critical of the relative absence of women and Indians in high-level leadership positions in the Guatemalan guerrilla movement, this criticism should not be allowed to obscure the significance of the hundreds who joined the movement with agendas that both paralleled and diverged from those of top leaders. Women, for example, frequently saw participation in the revolution as a vehicle through which sexism and discrimination could be addressed, despite the reluctance of leaders to raise these issues directly (see Chinchilla, 1998), and Indian women and men joined the revolution to address issues related to racism as well as economic exploitation.

Critical Essay #5

There is no doubt that many people in the United States who met Rigoberta for the first time in the early 1980s were impressed, moved, and even transfixed by her. She was young, articulate, and intelligent. For those of us who knew Guatemala, the fact that an indigenous woman from a country where Indians had been marginalized and subordinated could connect so well with audiences of people so different from her was extraordinary. Rigoberta left lasting impressions on cynical journalists and television interviewers as well.

Powerful as Rigoberta's book and, even more, her persona were in reaching uninitiated audiences, heads of state, and international diplomats, however, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* was hardly the human rights and solidarity movement's "little red book," and Rigoberta was never its leader. If it turns out to be true that scholars were not skeptical enough about Rigoberta's representations of her particular family and village, it is because the outlines of her account coincided with those of many other reputable sources, including a landmark study of land concentration and landlessness by the U.S. Agency for International Development published in 1982 and eyewitness and secondhand accounts by missionaries, priests, nuns, ministers, anthropologists, Peace Corps volunteers, journalists, refugees and immigrants, and United Nations workers.

While the popularity of Rigoberta's book on college campuses may have made it a key source for some students and teachers who knew little else about Guatemala, for the Guatemalan solidarity, human rights, and scholars groups it was hardly the only or even the most important one. At the national and international level, people concerned about Guatemala were never dependent solely on URNG representatives for their information about political conditions and human rights. Amnesty International, Americas Watch, scholars, journalists, and a myriad of church groups took great pains to document the situation and design campaigns for stopping the repression.

Even the National Network in Solidarity with Guatemala (NISGUA), formed in the early 1980s, had a wide range of groups and members as its affiliates-pacifists, armed-struggle supporters, liberals, socialists, human rights activists, atheists, clerics, missionaries, ordinary churchgoers, students and professionals, Spanish teachers, artists, anthropologists, archaeologists, world travelers, hippies, (U.S.) Native Americans, weavers and importers of indigenous crafts, and others. The URNG analysis of events and strategies was always available in NISGUA, but it was certainly not embraced without question. The most enduring point of unity in NISGUA was working to end serious human rights violations and changing U.S. policy. As Marilyn Moors, who worked closely with Washington, DC, groups and the national office, told me in a recent conversation, "Never have I known a network made up of more contentious groups and individuals than NISGUA in the 1980s." Her observation coincides with my own firsthand experience.

Groups affiliated with the solidarity and human rights networks included many Guatemalan activists, some of them recent immigrants, representing a variety of ages

and classes, ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds. The Guatemalan solidarity committee with which I worked in Los Angeles always had access to a wide variety of opinions from families of committee members and the large Guatemalan immigrant community, numbering somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000, including some 2,000 to 3,000 Q'anjob'al Indians. These voices included those of URNG supporters and combatants, former government soldiers and deserters, Q'anjob'al Indians who had worked with the Ejercito Guerrillo de los Pobres (Guerrilla Army of the Poor-EGP) and others who claimed to have been victimized by it, priests who supported the movement and priests who did not, Guatemalans who were Marxists and Guatemalans who were staunch anticommunists, and a variety of political party activists from left to right. People in the solidarity movement who had grown up in Guatemala or who had deep roots there were very familiar with the complexities and contradictions and the many levels of meaning, overt and hidden, of a social reality characterized more by repression than by democracy and trust.

Likewise, the Guatemala Scholars' Network, which began with some 20 members in the early 1980s and grew to some 350, has always been a politically and philosophically diverse group, as Stoll, who himself has been a member for some years, undoubtedly knows. The Scholars' Network included well-informed individuals with long experience in Guatemala. If we add together the Guatemalan activists, the scholar activists, and other students, journalists, and ex-missionaries and clerics, we undoubtedly had more people with firsthand knowledge of Guatemala in all its complexity than any other similar support movement in recent history. Behind the activism was a deep appreciation for historical context that Stoll, despite his anthropology training, surprisingly lacks.

If Stoll wishes to be taken seriously, he must do more than substitute one superficial, unidimensional stereotype for another. His portrayal of the Guatemala solidarity movement and the network of activist scholars who undertook human rights and solidarity work in the 1980s is little more than a caricature.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #6

Stoll asserts that anyone who subscribes to a historical view of the origins of army violence by dating it to the 1960s or to elite fears generated by land reform and the mobilization of workers and peasants during the 1944-1954 reform movements (violently brought to an end through a CIA-supported coup) and anyone who believes that poverty, discrimination, repression, and inequality created fertile ground for revolution has "bought into" the URNG line. Human rights agencies, solidarity organizations, the United Nations, European governments, scholars, religious people, and ordinary citizens have fallen for this URNG-propagated myth, Stoll believes, because Rigoberta's testimony has given it credibility.

But this version of history, in one form or another, is also shared by many Guatemalans, including those not necessarily sympathetic to the revolutionary movement. Guatemala's foreign minister, who recently spoke at my university, for example, cited poverty, discrimination, political repression, inequality, and a lack of democracy as the principal reasons for the war. The local deputy consul general talks in similar terms. Furthermore, most Guatemalans believe that Rigoberta's narrative is essentially true, if not for her and her family then for the many other Indians who suffered during the war. They remark on the naivete of a white North American anthropologist's traipsing through areas controlled or previously controlled by the army that have suffered repression asking questions about politics and clandestine organizations. They are stunned to learn, for example, that a trained anthropologist could ask the mayor of Uspantin if people in his town had been organized by the Committee for Campesino Unity and take his answer ("I don't recall calling a CUC meeting") at face value. With the indigenous poet Humberto Akabal, they believe that "in Guatemala, it is not that the rocks can't talk; it is that they don't want to." The debate over Stoll's critique of Rigoberta's book in the Guatemalan press was intense for little more than two weeks and then became insignificant. More important, most Guatemalan writers or politicians, including notoriously conservative and anticommunist ones such as Jorge Skinner-Klee and Carlos Manuel Pellecer, have found little in Stoll's argument with which they could identify. Skinner-Klee has gone so far as to call Rigoberta's book "a Guatemalan epic" on the order of the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*.

Stoll's version of the U.S. human rights and solidarity movements is naive at best and opportunist at worst. He must impeach not only Rigoberta but the whole of the human rights and solidarity movement to create space for his idiosyncratic version of recent Guatemalan history. He attempts to do this by caricaturing the movements and arguing that Rigoberta's testimony was their centerpiece. He gives little consideration to how his own positionality may have shaped his choice of an entry point into developed-country culture wars. He is unapologetic about his use of an inherently problematic methodology and insufficiently concerned about how the time and circumstances of his first entries into the region (in the middle of the worst of the war in the 1980s, when reportedly only the army and people sympathetic to it trusted him) might have shaped his understanding of rural indigenous Guatemala or how his conducting interviews in areas where he does not speak the local language may have influenced what people chose to

tell him. In the end, it is Stoll the journalist rather than Stoll the scholar who pursues what some have called the "symbolic impeachment" of Rigoberta Menchu's testimony.

Source: Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, "Of Straw Men and Stereotypes: Why Guatemalan Rocks Don't Talk," in *Latin American Perspectives,* Vol. 26, No. 6, November, 1999, pp. 29-37.

Critical Essay #7

In the following review of Rigoberta Menchú's I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Roger N. Lancaster examines controversies over the authenticity of the author's autobiography (developed originally as testimony emerging from relationships between U.S., European and Latin-American solidarity movements) by examining the literary form by which her testimony was developed and the goals she sought to meet with it.*

Two recent news items on Guatemala have made headlines in North American papers. One is the publication of the report of the UN Commission for Historical Clarification, which found the Guatemalan army overwhelmingly responsible for the political massacres that left some 200,000 Mayans dead or missing in the course of that country's 36-year civil war. The other comes from reports questioning the veracity of the biography of the best-known spokesperson for Guatemala's indigenous peoples, Rigoberta Menchu.

Clearly, the present airings of doubt about Rigoberta Menchu's life story are emblematic of the political skepticism of the 1990s□a decade that witnessed the collapse of really-existing socialism, the failure of Sandinismo in Nicaragua and the retreat of progressives everywhere from any semblance of a radical engagement or a global vision. We have to understand the present zeitgeist to understand why such stories now show up on the front pages of *The New York Times*.

The present controversies surrounding *I, Rigoberta Menchu* also require an understanding of how its literary-polemical form, the testimonio, or testimony, emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. The testimony grew out of the unique relationship between popular movements in Latin America□especially Central America□and solidarity movements in the United States and Western Europe. The goal of the testimony was to didactically convey salient sociological facts to a Northern audience through an exemplary life history, and to thereby solicit moral, political and economic support for local struggles. Revolutionary upheavals in Central America were in no small part struggles over basic material resources. These conflicts acquired horrific scale and brutality owing to the racist legacies of colonialism and the entrenchment of landed elites in authoritarian governments and abusive militaries. Communicating complex historical lessons like these has always been difficult, but it proved well-nigh impossible to convey the salient facts against a Reagan propaganda offensive demonizing Communist aggression in "our backyard."

The testimony offered an end-run around these obstacles. It attempted to convey an analysis of indisputable facts of scale□inequality, racism, repression and struggle□through the details of an individual life. Like its antecedent□the ethnobiographies collected by Oscar Lewis□the testimony condensed a life history into a single argument about a big picture. Therein lay the polemical strength but also the analytical weakness of the form. The testimony is convincing, not because it offers a studied, exhaustive analysis of social structures or historical developments, but because it weaves a narrative of discovery as an autobiographical tale: The author comes to the

Truth simply by knowing his or her own experiences, by claiming his or her own voice, by possessing his or her self. The appeal of the story is thus based on the authoritative voice of the speaker, who stands as a representative of larger social groups.

Rigoberta Menchu's life story was more successful than myriad other testimonies of the period because, in the circulation of meanings on a global scale, it better reflected the tastes and interests of its intended audience in the United States and Western Europe. Page by page, Menchu's life appears as a straightforward morality play about the coming-toconsciousness of a poor Indian peasant woman. As with didactic Hollywood movies, nothing complicates the picture, where poor Indians struggle against rich Ladinos. Menchu's struggles are those of Everywoman, her story is the story of all poor Guatemalans.

But individual life history seldom dovetails so clearly with the larger course of social history, much less with the demands of an audience craving clear-cut tales of unmediated authenticity. Individuals cannot really exemplify the singular experiences or uniform interests of larger groups. Poor Indian peasant women invariably turn out to have varied experiences, opinions and interests.

What was long whispered in solidarity circles and suspected by academics who used *I, Rigoberta Menchu* now appears to have been empirically documented: Some of the narrator's details do not quite square with the facts, at least the facts as recalled by other eye witnesses. With a middleschool education, Menchu was undoubtedly better educated than her story lets on. Three of Menchu's siblings died, apparently under circumstances bearing some resemblance to but not quite identical with events she describes. The central land struggle in Menchu's autobiography undeniably happened in the context of a highly stratified social system in which Spanish-speaking Ladinos wield power and wealth, but this particular conflict occurred not between poor Indians and rich Ladinos but, as is so often the case, between related indigenous families, neither of whom could be described as wealthy or powerful. And so on.

In short, Menchu appears to have told her story in a manner that force-fits her and her family's experiences into the social analysis she wished to dramatize. The narrator thus becomes Exemplary Rigoberta, the very personification of Maya struggles, edited and airbrushed into an icon who stands outside the course of real-life events (which are always complex) to embody a simplified lesson, a clear purpose, a Pure Idea.

Narrative devices like these□the use of composite personas, shadings of events□would have scarcely raised an eyebrow in a properly qualified ethnographic work or in an historical novel. But they undercut the authority of a text that purports to tell us the unvarnished truth□indeed, that reports to embody the truth, in a singular persona□without proviso or caveats. It cannot be said that anyone has come out very well in the ensuing brouhaha.

After casting himself as the Matt Drudge of anthropology, David Stoll has insisted that he never intended to attack or discredit Menchu. This is not very convincing. Stoll suggests in an interview in the March/April 1999 issue of *NACLA* that his real aim is to

contribute to a critical reassessment of the guerrilla struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. But poking holes in Menchu's autobiography does not demonstrate his by-now familiar refrain that violence only begets more violence. If one's goal were a balanced assessment, it would be far more logical to suggest that whatever semblance of formal democracy that now exists in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua owes its existence to the very revolutionary movements Stoll now disparages.

Menchu, for her part, has responded by questioning the timing of Stoll's book and *The New York Times* reporting it stimulated. She has suggested that such unflattering reportage is part of a conspiracy designed to cast doubt on the findings of the Guatemalan truth commission. In *NACLA*, the *Times*, and other vehicles, Menchu falls back on two standard defenses: Are you saying my brother isn't dead? Are you saying Indians are all liars? Once again, Menchu conflates her own persona with the people and with the movement.

Perhaps most disappointing have been the responses coming from the North American academic left. "I don't care whether it's true or not," huffs one scholar in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* . Others insist that Menchu's account is, in effect, still true, even if it is not. The Guatemala Scholars Network insists that Menchu was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize not because she watched her brother being burned alive or because she was eye-witness to horrific violence, but because of her role as a public spokesperson for the indigenous rights movement. Such a statement evades the obvious. Menchu was awarded the Prize precisely because she wove a convincing narrative about the deaths of her family members into a story about ethnic, class and political conflicts. Her family indeed met gruesome deaths at the hands of the state. But would her tale have had the same force, would it have received the same accolades, had it begun in the real-life complexity of land conflicts between related indigenous families?

Although Menchu's testimony has never much affected the course of indigenous rights or political mobilization inside Guatemala, her impact on solidarity politics, higher education and multiculturalism in the United States and other Northern countries has been more profound. For a time, she stood as an object lesson on the truth of identity and the power of authentic voices. Her testimony was touted as a new model of writing, one that superseded the traditional canon, standards of argumentation, and demands for ethnographic verification. She was appropriated as the most accessible of the postcolonials, and an image of Menchu was shaped that compounded the bases of identity politics□ poor, Indian, peasant, woman. On this count, the left, in effect, fell prey to its own worst impulses□a tendency to romanticize noble natives and to oversimplify the nature of social struggles in stratified societies.

It is not just for academic reasons that editorial airbrushing and oversimplification are bad practices. Iconization is a bad practice for the left because it offers a fake resolution for the real complexities and dilemmas of history. The emotional work performed by icons is good for rallying the faithful, but proves incompatible with effective struggle. Halos illuminate nothing. The facts matter. Details matter. Complexity matters. Any left incapable of working through the facts in all their complexity will be by definition inadequate to the task it poses.

This is no small point. Accuracy about the shape of local struggles is of critical importance, as Alejandro Bendafia's study of demobilized Contras, *Una Tragedia Campesina: Testimonios de la Resistencia*, illustrates. When the triumphant Sandinistas brought the revolution into remote areas of Nicaragua after their 1979 victory, they were drawn into pre-existing land feuds between contending campesino kin groups and political factions disputes much like those to which Menchu's relatives were party. Preaching the gospel of redistributive justice and class empowerment, inexperienced cadre took an oversimplified approach to the crazy-quilt patchwork of alliances they encountered in the countryside. In consequence, they sometimes took land from poor peasants to give to other poor peasants. Such mistakes, repeated wherever the FSLN had shallow roots or failed to understand local conflicts, embittered a section of the rural poor and created the Contra base that was so effectively mobilized by Washington.

But mistakes in practice and interpretation notwithstanding, some basic facts remain: Large numbers of people in Central America joined revolutionary struggles in the 1970s and 1980s not because they were deceived by clever storytellers who wielded details in a slippery manner, but because gross inequalities and political repression led them to the conclusion that only revolutionary movements could implement the desired changes.

Who is telling that story in a plausible, methodical manner today?

Source: Roger N. Lancaster, "Rigoberta's Testimonio," in *NACLA Report on the Americas,* Vol. 32, Issue 6, May-June, 1999, p. 4.

Critical Essay #8

In the following interview with Rigoberta Menchú (author of the autobiography, I, Rigoberta Menchú*), Burt and Rosen discuss the controversies over the authenticity of the author's biography and the Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI) project, which collected evidence of civil-war abuses in Guatemala.*

Rigoberta Menchu, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 and has been a tireless activist for indigenous and human rights, has become the subject of controversy. Last fall, anthropologist David Stoll, a professor at Middlebury College, published a book entitled *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Westview Press, 1998), in which he questions many aspects of Rigoberta's life story presented in *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (Verso, 1984). On December 15, *The New York Times* ran a front-page story reporting on the controversy, and sent one of its sleuthing reporters to Guatemala to corroborate some of Stoll's findings. In the midst of the controversy, Guatemala is still struggling to consolidate its fragile peace and to find ways of addressing the legacies of 36 years of war. In this interview, which took place on February 10 in the NACLA offices, Rigoberta discusses the controversy and its impact on the current political situation in Guatemala. NACLA correspondent Steve Dudley interviewed David Stoll by telephone on January 26.

Last year, the Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI) project, which documented the testimonies of the victims of Guatemala's civil war, made public its final report. The UN Commission on Historical Clarification is scheduled to release its final report in late February. How would you describe these two processes and their relevance to building peace in Guatemala today?

The REMHI and the UN Commission are tremendously important because they have exhaustively documented the nature of the crimes committed by the Guatemalan armed forces during the 36-year conflict. We now know the names and stories of many of the victims   as well as of the victimizers.

The REMHI was particularly important because it established a new methodology for recovering the testimonies of the thousands of people who suffered these crimes. Most investigations are run by a few experts who show up and ask questions and tell people how to present their testimonies. But the REMHI was designed to be a participatory investigation, in which community leaders   many of whom were Mayan   interviewed over 6,000 victims and eyewitnesses. This made it possible to collect information about more than 50,000 cases of human rights violations, and out of these individual memories to begin to construct a collective memory.

Monsignor Gerardi, who led the REMHI, paid with his life so that this project could materialize. The Monsignor's death was a tremendous blow to us, but we continue to work in defense of human rights in honor of his memory.

REMHI has been described as a process of recovering memory "from below." How would you characterize this process and its relationship to the work of the UN Commission?

The REMHI set the standard for truth-seeking; this was important because that meant that the UN Commission had to rise to the level of the REMHI report. In many ways, the two reports are complimentary, and together they have succeeded in breaking the fear and terror that have dominated Guatemalan society for so long.

More than 80% of all the testimonies collected by REMHI were of indigenous people. The REMHI made it possible that their great and painful story be heard. It marks the first time in our history that indigenous people were active participants in the writing of their own history. And they were also participants in drawing up the recommendations for the future to ensure that these atrocities never happen again. It was also a small compensation to the victims for all they had suffered   for the first time they could tell their stories without fear and be certain that it was not in vain.

The other main achievement of the REMHI project is that no one can now deny what happened in Guatemala. There was a systematic campaign of genocide and ethnocide against the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. REHMI represents a struggle against forgetting. A struggle against indifference. Many people have been victims of the violence, and not everyone has told their story. But it is no longer a question of individual guilt; it is a national tragedy.

Our hope is that this will contribute to a process of reconciliation, of coming together, of rebuilding confidence in the future. For finding and uncovering the truth gives us an opportunity to start all over again.

Isn't it true that there are social forces in Guatemala who do not want this process of truthtelling to continue?

Clearly. For example, REMHI and the UN Commission were denied access to the secret files of the G-2, one of the most feared secret police forces in the past. Nor did they have access to the important files of the army or the national police.

The Association of Military Veterans reportedly has its own files, which it has not made available. There are also those who say, "Well yes, the indigenous people were killed, but it was necessary. The army was just carrying out its mission. Rios Montt didn't want to kill. He just wanted to bring things under control. The Communists and theologians manipulated the situation and exposed the people by creating a myth."

So there is a tendency to want to clean up the image of the dirty war. But the truth uncovered by the REMHI can no longer be hidden. It cannot be undone. It is now part of the historical record.

How do you respond to the charges by numerous critics, stemming from the book published by David Stoll questioning aspects of your first book, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*,

that your story is at least partly fabricated? Has this controversy had any effect on the process you have been describing?

We have had many meetings with human rights groups and various indigenous organizations in Guatemala, and we are all concerned because the discussion has been brought to a personal level, to attempt to dispute the story of Rigoberta Menchu.

In many ways, during the 1980s, I was a solitary indigenous voice, the only survivor, upon whom fell the task of traveling the world, going to the UN and to human rights groups around the world to tell them of what was happening in Guatemala. Now there is an effort to say that this solitary voice is not valid. But this is not the 1980s, when people were silent and there were many reasons to worry; now we are over 30,000 strong, and every story being told, every testimony gathered by REMHI and the UN Commission, is part of the broader tapestry of thousands of stories that are being woven together to write our history. Mine is just one page among thousands that have confirmed what really happened in Guatemala.

The implication of the charges is that if Rigoberta Menchu   the best-known Indian from Guatemala, a Nobel laureate   is lying, then these Indians who are unknown must also be lying. We believe there is a malicious element in all of this, and, moreover, that it is politically motivated. We are unsure where this political campaign is coming from. But we have no doubt that there are sectors who do not want the people to tell their stories. In some way, there is a complicity here. If during the 1980s someone said that I was telling lies, and those charges had been investigated, they would have discovered the extreme violence going on in my country. The onslaught against the indigenous population was just beginning when I fled Guatemala, so they might have helped prevent the 422 massacres that took place.

Of course there are omissions in my book. Among the most evident omission is in relation to my brother Patrocinio. The names of the witnesses who saw the torture and who told the story are left out. These were conscious omissions because in the context of the 1980s this was necessary to protect the lives of those who remained in Guatemala. If I had said my sister Anita was with my mother when they burned my brother Patrocinio, I would have been exposing her to death. And so many more people who were witnesses also would have been put at risk. Perhaps these omissions do not make any sense today because we are in a different period. So a more constructive way of responding is to say that the collective testimony of REMHI and the UN Commission is adding to the pages of the history of the Guatemalan people.

It is true, as Mr. Stoll says, that I spent a lot of time with the Belgian nuns of the Order of the Holy Family and the school they run, which provides education mainly to middle and upper-middle class Guatemalans. I was there for a long time, but as a servant. I mopped floors and cleaned toilets, work that I am very proud to have done. It was not an "elite" school as Mr. Stoll says. In Guatemala there are very few elite schools   the elite sends its children to Harvard. I will never complain about the time I spent there, because the Sisters protected me and taught me many things.

Another of Mr. Stoll's charges is that the land conflict I describe was a simple dispute between my grandparents. Now my grandparents have been dead for some time. The fact is that there was a dispute among my grandparents because they had bought a farm together and they never could decide who owned which part, but that was not the problem. The problem was a large old-growth forest which the big landowners coveted and which my father, with a group of people, was also soliciting from the government because these were public lands. So, Mr. Stoll tells only a part of the truth. He doesn't say that there were more actors involved in fact there were seven actors and the dispute still hasn't been resolved. We hope that the land census can resolve these ongoing land disputes. But to say that it was a dispute among Indians among brothers is malicious and only a partial version of the truth. Mr. Stoll says he consulted an official file of 600 pages. But the file is a thousand pages long; what do the 400 pages that he does not mention say?

I think that the intention is to divert the question of collective memory by bringing the discussion to a personal level. Of course, there are other intentions here as well. I think that underlying this is the fact that the "official history" is always written by others. The conquistadors, the victors, the victimizers have always written history. It is unfathomable for certain sectors in Guatemala that we have written our own history, that we have insisted on our rights to our own memory and our own history. They would liked to see us remain victims forever.

I am concerned, however, that at this particular moment, this controversy might negatively affect the process of establishing the collective truth of the victims of this war. If it had erupted prior to the REMHI report, the official version of Guatemalan history might have triumphed.

Your book has also been questioned as a political tool. How do you respond to these charges?

It is obvious that Mr. Stoll is obsessed with his own conclusion. For some time he has tried to talk with me and I haven't wanted to do so. He also tried to interview various friends. He would say, "Look, I know your history, and I know who your parents were and I have information about them." His only intention was to corroborate his own version of events, and he never had the respect to listen to the people, and that's why I never wanted to talk to him. For my own dignity, I didn't want to engage in this discussion.

But the question is this: For many years it has been said that we Indians are useless and ignorant, that we can't make our own decisions, that we are manipulated by the Communists and the theologians, that the theologians turned me into a myth. In reality, the intention is to destroy the myth of Rigoberta Menchu. But he doesn't realize that this myth called Rigoberta Menchu has blood in her veins, believes in the world, believes in humanity, believes in her people. This myth is not carved out of stone, but is a living, breathing person.

My book was a cry in the silence. It had no objective other than to expose the carnage being deployed against the Guatemalan people. It was the cry of a survivor, one of the first survivors who managed to cross the border alive. I also traveled all over the world to tell about what happened to my parents. In those years, I was very conscious that my only mission in the world was to not permit that those atrocities continue. And I think I have fulfilled that mission.

I am happy that it fell on me to take part in the Peace Accords, the dialogues, the negotiations, and that I even had the human ability and the sensitivity as a woman to shake hands with the military officers on the day following the signing of the Peace Accords. We planted a tree in the Ixcan together   the Minister of Defense, a guerilla commander and myself. It was not just theater. It was something very deeply felt.

I don't want to say that I forgive what happened in the past. I think that forgiveness will evolve as part of a much larger process. I want to see justice. I want to see respect. I want to see that we can live together peacefully so that forgiveness can take place. But yes, a demonstration of a willingness to begin again was important. It is the same with my book. If some people didn't hear my cry back in 1982 or heard it and remained complicit in what happened in Guatemala, that too is part of our collective history.

But many people did hear, and therefore we were able to obtain the support of human rights organizations and the UN. In 1984 we succeeded for the first time in having a special UN rapporteur named to Guatemala. But this testimony no longer belongs only to me. It belongs to Guatemala and to the world; it belongs to the memory of indigenous people everywhere, and especially to all those who are survivors.

Tell us about the work you see ahead of you.

Most importantly, I am not alone. There is a team of people who work with me at the Rigoberta Menchu Tum Foundation. We have worked tirelessly to assist local efforts to address the problems of reconciliation and reconstruction. We have especially worked hard to promote political participation on both a municipal and regional level. Remember that most of those assassinated during the war were community activists. We have to rebuild local leadership, and it is our hope that young people will become more and more involved in this task.

We have also been involved in the debate over constitutional and educational reforms. Rather than remaining on the sidelines saying, "we like this" or "we don't like that," we have made concrete proposals. And in the case of education, we believe that unless it is intercultural, interethnic and multilingual, then intolerance will continue, racism will continue, and so will impunity.

It is not true   and I want to say this very clearly   that I am working to be the next president of Guatemala. Many sectors fear this because they don't see me as an ally, but as an adversary. The same thing happened to Martin Luther King and many other world leaders who were seen by those in power as adversaries.

What I do want to do is be a part of the international campaign to promote a culture of peace in the year 2000. But I hope we can establish a new peace ethic in which justice is considered an essential part of peace. Without justice there is no peace. And there can be no justice without democracy, without development, without respect, without equity.

Source: Jo-Marie Burt and Fred Rosen, "Truth-telling and Memory in Postwar Guatemala: An Interview with Rigoberta Menchu," in *NACLA Report on the Americas,* Vol. 32, Issue 5, March-April, 1999, p. 6.

Critical Essay #9

In the following essay, Janet Varner Gunn examines the ethics of reading Third World autobiographies in the context of Rigoberta Menchú's autobiography I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Varner Gunn discusses the narrative form of both the autobiography and the more collective form of "testimony" as presented in Menchú's work.*

I'll never forget the first time I stood in front of a university classroom in the fall of 1966. It was packed with the composition students I would be teaching as a part-timer at a large urban campus in Chicago. Names like Mary Ellen Arpino, Lois Leposky, Joan Krishko, and Ron Sigada reminded me of my own classmates back in the Western Pennsylvania mining town where I was born. Part of the Anglo-Saxon minority in Portage, I had grown up feeling both superior to and excluded from the Italian and Eastern European Catholics whose lives I observed with both fear and envy through the window of my Republican childhood.

Those people were the "foreigners," according to my great-Aunt Mary who had come to the United States from Scotland when she and my grandmother were still toddlers. Annie Dillard's Western Pennsylvania childhood was spent in fear and envy of the Irish Catholic Jo Anne Sheehys who, in Dillard's *An American Childhood,* iceskated in the winter street outside her Point Breeze house in Pittsburgh. In my own adolescence, I was in awe of the Mary Ellens and the Joanies whose bodies glided with their own "radiance" across the teen canteen dance floor.

As soon as I began calling the roll on that first day of composition class, I knew that I would be canceling most of the supplementary texts I had added to the anthology of essays departmentally required for all composition sections. I would make room on the syllabus for my students' lives. The course, I hoped, would be a larger window on American ethnicity.

After leaving Chicago for Chapel Hill some ten years after I began my teaching career, Annie Dillard's autobiography, had it been published by then, might have been the model of the book I wanted to write about growing up in Western Pennsylvania. Having left the flat plain of the Middle West, I found myself again in the Back Country whose low mountains chained down the Alleghenies to the Carolina Piedmont. But instead of writing my own autobiography, I returned to graduate school at the end of my first year in North Carolina so that I could develop a theory of autobiography that employed the writing of others.

Four years after publishing my dissertation, I left for a city among other hills halfway around the world. Divorced by then and taking my first sabbatical since starting out in that Chicago classroom, I decided that I wanted to turn fifty in Jerusalem, not Greensboro, North Carolina where I was a tenured professor of religion and literature. It was on my subsequent return to Jerusalem that I first read Dillard's *An American Childhood.* Having taken the sabbatical to begin a book on the autobiography of the

Holocaust, I later went back to Jerusalem to work and study on the Palestinian West Bank.

It was in the third world, then, that I first read Annie Dillard's autobiography and, as it turned out, began writing my own. I say, "as it turned out," because I didn't realize how much of my own life was implicated in a book I began to write about a Palestinian refugee family. Gaining access to the life of that family was not a matter of getting outside my own window but of acknowledging that it was there: I was looking at them from somewhere. How the window of my own life both blocks and facilitates the telling of Palestinian lives was part of the story I wanted to tell.

The information I have been supplying thus far is not personal background but critical foreground to the more explicit argument I want to develop about an ethics of reading third world autobiography, which begins with the reader, not with the text. Defining the location of that reader is the first interpretive task for such an ethics. The next interpretive task requires the interrogating of that location. Defining and interrogating the reader's location finally affords the reader what Edward Said calls a "wider optics"□a new and expanded location which can move interpretation toward transformation or what George Yudice has recently called an "ethics of survival," which engages the autobiographical activity of the first world reader as well as the third world text. Along the way, I will be addressing the differing functions of the "other" in first and third world representations of selfhood and identity.

I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala is the third world autobiography I want to use. A life history set in a country that accounts for more than half of the disappeared in Latin America, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* is a counter-story that works against such disappearance to the extent that it testifies to the appearance of her people on the stage of history and names the harsh reality in which they live. It is furthermore a resistance story about directing that history and transforming that reality.

Life stories like Menchu's emerged in Latin America after the Cuban Revolution and were elicited by other more privileged women like the Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, who edited and inscribed Menchu's story. She interviewed Menchu in Paris, where the Guatemalan had been invited in 1982 to participate in a conference sponsored by the 31 January Popular Front. The organization's name commemorates the day in 1980 when Menchu's father and other early leaders of the Committee of Campesino Unity had been burned to death during their peaceful occupation of the Spanish embassy in Guatemala City to protest military repression in their villages.

Latin American women like Burgos-Debray were trying to overcome their own marginality in a patriarchal culture. Through such testimonials as Menchu's, they wanted to show that oppressed people were subjects and not merely objects of national histories. The inscribers of these testimonials were also raising questions about the negative aspects of the concept "third world" with its connotations of dependency and racial backwardness. They were helping to redefine "third world" as a positive term of radical critique against colonialist policies both inside and outside Latin America.

When I returned to my teaching career in the United States, I decided to use *An American Childhood* as a point of embarkation for the course on third world autobiography which I team-taught with an anthropologist. An autobiography like hers, we agreed, could be useful in defining our own location since most of us, like Dillard, had had a middleclass American childhood. More than that, Dillard would help us to measure the distance between our lives and Menchu's, in their differing modes of selfrepresentation as well as their material conditions.

In beginning the course with Dillard, we began to appreciate some of the differences between what I called autobiography of nostalgia and the testimonial. The former represents a mainstream tradition of self-writing in the industrialized West and North. A strategy of recovering what would otherwise be lost, autobiography of nostalgia is directed toward the past. The autobiographer's identity depends not only on recovering this past but on individuating his or her experience of the past. Childhood memories are especially important since it is in that period that the process of individuation has its start. That process is experienced as separation, painful but necessary to establish a self/world boundary that must be kept essentially intact to assure the unique individuality on which identity is based. Growing up requires the self's outward movement into the world, but in such a way that a sense of boundary is maintained and even sharpened by experiences of otherness. The other, alluring but dangerous, continues to reset those limits that keep alive one's sense of having a self.

Unlike nostalgic autobiography of the first world, the testimonial's understanding of selfhood is based on collective identity, not individuality. Early in her account, Menchu is quick to insist that her "personal experience is the reality of a whole people." What follows in the first half of her book is the description of rituals which establish the bond between the community and each of its members. Those rituals begin with the practice of the mother who, "on the first day of her pregnancy goes with her husband to tell . . . elected leaders that she's going to have a child, because the child will not only belong to them but to the whole community."

Like other third world autobiographies, the testimonial is oriented toward creating a future rather than recovering a past. It is a form of utopian literature that contributes to the realization of a liberated society based on distributive justice. A form of resistance literature as well as utopian literature, the testimonial resists not only economic and political oppression, but also any nostalgic pull towards an idealized past□pre-Hispanic origins, for instance, which promise false comfort. To resort to such indigenism would implicate Menchu in the very culture from which her testimonial wants to free itself.

While autobiography of nostalgia welcomes and, in fact, needs the other, the testimonial has to find ways of deconstructing it, since otherness in the third world is the most basic structure of colonial control. It is a construction by means of which the oppressed are kept "barbarian" and the colonizer securely defined as the bearer of civilization's burden. The operative existence of the other justifies a colonialist structure of domination.

Through autobiography of nostalgia like *An American Childhood,* I tried to define and establish the location from which the first world reader listens to the voice of Rigoberta Menchu. The reader I constructed is a reader very much like myself some ten years ago when I developed a theory of autobiography based on the self-writing of Thoreau, Wordsworth, and Proust□all of them writing in the romantic tradition of an Annie Dillard and all of them members of a culture that already has a voice (Gunn, *Autobiography*). Although I raised questions about an autobiographical tradition that privileged the private and ahistorical self, it was not until I spent time in the third world that I began to see that another set of questions had to be raised about the "narrative space of familiarity" that my very choice of texts constructed (Kaplan). That space was first of all defined by the first world citizenship of my informants. To be sure, I ended my project with Black Elk, but even there I was reading his testimonial out of the location I had established by means of the others. It is that location I began to interrogate with the help of Menchu.

Were the reader to respond to Menchu from an unexamined mainstream location in the first world, she would, I think, be disturbed or simply incredulous at the suffering that fills Menchu's world and frustrated at how little she could do to alleviate that suffering. She might conclude much like Jane Tompkins did in her essay on American Indians: "The moral problem that confronts me now is not that I can never have any facts to go on, but that the work I do is not directed towards solving the kinds of problems that studying the Indians has awakened me to." Such limits must be acknowledged in establishing an ethics of reading third world autobiography that gets us beyond a conventional ethics of altruism to an "ethics of survival."

An American Childhood epitomizes a nostalgic mode of self-representation. The following passage illustrates several of its main characteristics:

How much noticing could I permit myself without
driving myself round the bend? Too much noticing
and I was too self-conscious to live; I trapped and
paralyzed myself, and I dragged my friends down
with me, so that we couldn't meet each other's eyes,
my own loud awareness damning us both. Too little
noticing, though . . . and I would miss the whole
show. I would awake on my deathbed and say,
What was that?

Replete with echoes from Thoreau's famous words about going to the woods to live deliberately, Dillard's passage underscores three features associated with a mainstream autobiographical tradition of the industrialized world. First of all, its "loud awareness" calls attention to a Cartesian singularity of consciousness. Second, the passage calls attention to an aesthetics within which individuation and style are coterminous. Third, Dillard's exact noticing combines with exact expression to situate the passage in a tradition which privileges inner selfness as both the spring of artistic activity and the startingpoint of ontological reckoning. The world is signifi- cant to the extent that it enters and is ratified by one's consciousness: Dillard writes, ". . . things themselves

possessed no fixed and intrinsic amount of interest; instead things were interesting as long as you had attention to give them."

Nostalgic autobiography seems to hold out the promise that memory can achieve perfect rapport with the past. Dillard writes her autobiography to rescue the sensuous details of her childhood from what she calls a "cave of oblivion." She understands memory to be an empty space individually filled rather than a cultural activity practiced in and informed by an historical and ideological situation. In order to maintain a centered "I" by defining itself against the other, Dillard's autobiographical agenda has to remain fixed. In the sense that Menchu's testimonial "I" represents the communal and resistant "we," its agenda must remain open.

The comfortable Pittsburgh neighborhoods of Point Breeze and Squirrel Hill where Annie Dillard had her American childhood are worlds away from the inhospitable mountains and fincas of Guatemala where Menchu grew up. Even so, Dillard has her dangerous places: the "dark ways" of the Roman Catholic Sheehy family, the "greasy black soil" of Doc Hall's alley, the Frick Park bridges under which the bums had been living since the Great Depression, and, in the earliest memory of all, her own bedroom into whose corners a slithering, elongated "thing" would burst nightly to search her out. In the process of figuring the "thing" out as the lights of passing cars, young Annie was "forced" to what she calls "the very rim of her being, to the membrane of skin that both separates and connects the inner life and the outer world."

In the daily mapping of her world, it is important for Dillard to name those experiences of what might be called the other but at the same time to keep them on the outside of that membrane. Like the ice-skating figure of Jo Anne Sheehy whom she watches from the "peace and safety" of the Dillard house, they are experiences which take place on the outside of her skin's rim□dark, dangerous, criminal, but also beautiful, mysterious, and "radiant." Dillard's child is careful to keep the membrane virginally unbroken, but she needs nonetheless to be taken to her "edge" with that combination of "desire and derision" which communicates the anxiety involved in the construction of otherness (Bhabha).

Not surprisingly, Menchu's autobiographical agenda is quite different. But in a world more literally dangerous, it is surprisingly more open. The telling of her story is a matter of cultural survival. In telling that story to Burgos-Debray, she makes it clear that she used the story of her own past as a strategy for organizing her people against landowners and the larger system of oppression whose interests they represented. "I had some political work to do, organizing the people there, and at the same time getting them to understand me by telling them about my past, what had happened to me in my life, the reasons for the pain we suffer, and the causes of poverty."

In no way unique, Menchu's story is intended to elicit recognition and, in naming the suffering she shares with her people, to deliver them and herself from muteness. Such muteness is a product of oppression. As recently observed by a fellow-member of the Committee of Campesino Unity, "a person can be poor, dirt poor, but not even realize the depth of their poverty since it's all they know" (MacGregor). To take notice of the

oppression and to give it a name is the first step beyond it. Noticing, it turns out, is an even more important activity in Menchu's culture of "silence" than it is in Dillard's culture, whose voice is secure. But it is a noticing of material conditions, not a noticing of noticing.

Menchu's testimonial is a story of resistance as well as a story of oppression. More precisely, her testimonial is itself an act of resistance. Solidarity growing out of resistance as much as membership in a community of the oppressed produces the circumstances of her identity. Menchu has to be reminded of these circumstances by a twelveyear- old when she is on the verge of hopelessness following the torture deaths of her brother and then her mother. "'A revolutionary isn't born out of something good,'" the young girl told her; "'she is born out of wretchedness and bitterness.'" The twelve-year-old goes on to add something very foreign to an autobiographer of consciousness like Dillard: "We have to fight without measuring our suffering, or what we experience, or thinking about the monstrous things we must bear in life." Menchu's testimonial is instead an autobiography of conscientization.

Menchu leaves behind the communal rituals that have long anchored her and her people in order to enter resistance activity that keeps her on the run outside her own community. Far from mourning her loss, she opens herself to new and potentially conflicting strategies of survival, especially in learning Spanish and turning to the Bible. Spanish is the language of her enemy; those who learn it, as her father cautioned her, often leave the Indian community. The Bible had been used by many priests and nuns to keep her people "dormant while others took advantage of their passivity." Menchu, however, uses both, especially the Bible, as "weapons." Far from being "an unlikely, movie-set world" as it was for Dillard, the Bible became a document by means of which Menchu could understand her people's reality. Moses "gets pluralized and Christ turns into a political militant" (Sommer). Biblical stories allowed Menchu and her people to give yet another name to their oppression.

Instead of constructing a single map within whose boundaries a Dillard can hold safely onto a sense of individual identity, Menchu superimposes many "conflicting maps" in a collective and incorporative struggle for communal survival (Sommer). Yudice notes (in words that echo liberation theologian Enrique Dussel), "her oppression and that of her people have opened them to an unfixity delimited by the unboundedness of struggle."

Dillard's autobiography set side-by-side with Menchu's testimonial raises a new set of issues that can move us in the direction of Yudice's "ethics of survival." A third world testimonial like Menchu's serves to destabilize the nostalgic structure of autobiography based on a loss and recovery ostensibly beyond the marketplace that gives force to those very terms. More important, it lays the ground for exposing otherness as that construction which keeps women, blacks, Jews, Palestinians, and Guatemalan Indians in their subordinate place.

In order that interpretation become transformative and reading of third world autobiography be ethical, we need to re-insert texts into political cultures and what Raymond Williams calls the "life of communities" (Said). The Pittsburgh of the Fricks

and Carnegies is also the Pittsburgh of the unemployed steelworkers and the black slums. That the latter are outside Dillard's ken has everything to do with the fact that the former are not. Gerald Graff has recently reminded us that "what we don't see enables and limits what we do see." He was offering a personal account of how his teaching of *Heart of Darkness* has changed as a result of confronting a very different reading of the text from the third world perspective of the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe. Simply out of sight from this or that location, huge chunks of the world are blocked out.

Dillard's memories of Pittsburgh block out the Polish and Slovak steelworkers and the Hill District ghetto except, in the case of the latter, as a place where boarding-school boys carouse. To acknowledge such unavoidable blocking is to open the way for examining the emancipatory potential of autobiographical practice in testimonials like *I, Rigoberta Menchu.* With that "wider optics," we might find a way of breaking through the membrane of critical isolation and solitude to an ethical criticism practiced "in solidarity with others struggling for survival" (Yudice).

Cornel West identifies as an Enlightenment legacy "the inability to believe in the capacities of oppressed people to create cultural products of value and oppositional groups of value." In any ethical reading of third world autobiography, the racism inherent in this legacy must be exposed and rejected. George Yudice turns this legacy on its head when he concludes his essay "Marginality and the Ethics of Survival" by defining "ethical practice" as the "political art of seeking articulations among all the 'marginalized' and oppressed, in the interests of our own survival." "We need not speak for others," he says, "but we are responsible for a 'self-forming activity' that can in no way be ethical if we do not act against the 'disappearance' of oppressed subjects."

Autobiography like *I, Rigoberta Menchu* calls on first world readers to take responsibility, not for the third world but for the locatedness and therefore the limitations of our own perspective. Acknowledging those limitations might contribute to the survival of us all. The ultimate window of opportunity is to stand with Menchu and, acknowledging the cost borne by the third world for our own selfhood, to affiliate at the borders between us.

Source: Janet Varner Gunn, "'A Window of Opportunity': An Ethics of reading Third World Autobiography," in *College Literature,* Vol., 19, No. 3, October-February, 1992, p. 162.

Topics for Further Study

Research ancient Mayan culture, with particular emphasis on respect for nature and family and rites of passage. Compare and contrast the salient elements of ancient Mayan culture and modern Quiché Indian culture. What has remained intact? What has evolved?

Investigate the United States' involvement in Guatemalan politics and economy from 1960 to 1990, with emphasis on the U.S. anti-Communist policies of the Cold War. What were the effects of U.S. intervention on Indian land holdings and family structure?

Trace the development of Menchú's feminist sensibility, and the way she acknowledges, confronts, preserves, and adapts traditional notions of family, motherhood, womanhood, and *machismo*.

Analyze the structure and recurring themes of Menchú's story as testimony. Compare and contrast her testimony to African-American narratives, such as those of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X. What themes of struggle and oppression, as well as triumph and resilience, are present in both narratives?

What Do I Read Next?

Crossing Borders is Menchú's 1998 sequel to her autobiography *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. In it she details her continuing work and struggles after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992.

Rigoberta Menchú Tum: Champion of Human Rights is a biography of Menchú appropriate for secondary-school readers.

Guatemalan Women Speak, is a collection of translated statements from *ladino* and Indian women on a broad range of topics including "Earning a Living," "Being Indian," and "Fighting Back."

Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans, by David Stoll, is decried by supporters of Menchú as a conservative attack on Menchú's purpose in telling her story, and praised by others as an enlightening analysis of inconsistencies in Menchú's story.

Teaching and Testimony: Rigoberta Menchú and the North American Classroom, a collection of essays written by college professors and teachers about the use of *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* in their classroom, offering a comprehensive analysis of historical context, literary form, and critical theory.

Kaffir Boy: The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa is a powerful autobiography of a young man confronting the horrors of discrimination, abject poverty, and police terrorizing, and, against all odds, becoming a tennis player who eventually wins a scholarship to an American university.

Further Study

hooks, bell, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, South End Press, 1984.

A series of easily accessible essays addressing the topic of feminist political and personal action, in practical terms, from solidarity with other women to the nature of work, relationships with men, education, and struggle, among others.

Gómez-Quiñones, Juan, *Chicano Politics: Reality and Promise 1940-1990*, University of New Mexico Press, 1990.

A political history of Mexico and in the United States, delineated along chronological and ideological lines, clarifies similarities and differences in the conditions of laborers and their fight for social equality and justice.

Roediger, David R., *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Verso, 1991.

A dense but thought-provoking investigation into the process of racial identity formation, and the effects of this racial identification on the size, strength, unity, structure, and progress of the American working class and labor movement. Sheds additional light on why the barriers between *ladinos* and Indians remained intact for so long, so tenaciously.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

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□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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