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How to hear the unspoken: Engaging cross-cultural communication through the Latin American testimonial narrative

Elena Flores Ruiz-Aho
University of South Florida

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How to Hear the Unspoken: Engaging Cross-Cultural Communication
Through the Latin American Testimonial Narrative

by

Elena Flores Ruiz-Aho

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of Humanities
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University of South Florida

Major Professor: Ofelia Schutte, Ph.D.
Charles Guignon, Ph.D.
Madeline Camara, Ph.D.

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For Kevin, without reasons.

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How to Hear the Unspoken: Engaging Cross-Cultural Communication Through the Latin American Testimonial Narrative

Elena Flores Ruiz-Aho

ABSTRACT

This project seeks to address issues in cultural politics brought on by difficulties in cross-cultural *communication*, particularly as these problems manifest themselves in twentieth century Latin American testimonial narratives. By developing a critical line of questioning drawn from Gayatri Spivak's influential article "Can the Subaltern Speak," one aim herein is to analyze and describe the ways in which the narrative, *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así Me Nació la Conciencia*, translated into English as *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, exemplifies the incommensurable nature of cross-cultural discursive attempts. This is done through a twofold method: one, by placing heavy emphasis on *the role of the reader* as constitutor of meaning in a (textual) discursive transaction between culturally-different agents, and two, by drawing attention to the role of *historically-determined interpretive frameworks* in the reception and interpretation of Subaltern enunciative acts. The latter, I argue, is necessary for gaining an adequate understanding of receiving and conveying meaning within cross-cultural paradigms. To this end, as an example of the problems, contextual and methodological, that arise in such communicative attempts between cultures, I take up the academic controversy stirred up by the publication of David Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Lastly, I investigate the socio-political implications of such failures in intercultural communication, giving rise to secondary lines of questioning such as finding ways to create favorable conditions for the possibility of genuine cross-cultural dialogue. One possibility, I suggest, is adopting a method of reading/listening which, borrowing from phenomenology, is continually *on the way*, always unfinished, and lets the life of the subaltern *emerge* by remaining open, not just to what is said, but to what is left *unsaid*.

INTRODUCTION

The question at the heart of this thesis is this: If, as the postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak has proposed, the rejoinder to the question “can the subaltern¹ speak,” is *no*—because if she² could speak in a way that *mattered* to us she would cease to be subaltern—then how can we, as readers of subaltern texts, ever hope to hear what the Other is saying? In other words, how can we understand subaltern speaking practices *as they are expressed from the point of subalternity* without necessarily having to decode such practices through our own conceptual orthodoxies (and in so doing, distort the message in our own image)? For what will be taken as having been ‘understood’ then, to be sure, will bear far more resemblance to the worldview of the listener than to the speaker or, for our purposes, to the Western reader than the subaltern narrator. To this end, if the meaning of subaltern discursive acts cannot be heard as such, but are always refracted through the lens of the interlocutor’s culture (often in disproportionate ways), how is equitable dialogue between cultures possible? This is the all-embracing predicament of my research.

Instead of a fixed answer, I propose that the first step towards a continual, regenerative understanding of the question of cross cultural commensurability lies in grasping the very inescapability of our own interpretive frameworks, or what Heidegger refers to as “our hermeneutic situation.”³ In short, the way we engage other worlds, in an effort to understand them, is at all times colored by how we already make sense of our *own* world. Where ‘world’ is seen as the socio-historical background that we grow into, we pre-reflectively graft this background or sense of intelligibility onto the cultures we seek to understand, despite points of incompatibility or incongruity. This interpretive reflex, in turn, has far reaching social and, more importantly, *political* ramifications insofar as it precludes the possibility of “genuine” dialogue between cultures, especially when it is deployed by Western cultures in the form of what Weber calls “instrumental rationality.”⁴

However, in disposing with the fiction that a detached, completely “neutral” position exists which can yield something like controlled “objective knowledge,” one curative reply to cross-cultural incommensurability is to simply *let be*; to become aware of our hermeneutic prejudices, from which we cannot escape, and to open ourselves up, as readers, to a kind of receptivity which requires paying very careful attention not to what the narrator is saying (for as subaltern, it is incommensurable) but to *what she cannot be heard as saying* because our ears do not yet know how to reach for this ‘silence’. In short, we must learn to hear for the differences that make a difference (as in divergent historical traditions), grapple with the anxiety this loss of meaning provokes—an anxiety that emerges when we don’t ‘know’ what is going on – and reconnect the

nexus of relations lost through instrumental encounters with texts. We may do this, as the title suggests, by hearing carefully for the *unsaid* that is at all times nested in the Said: for the circumstantial patterns of the social fabric which let meaning emerge in culturally distinctive ways. Thus, in order to hear how it is the Other *relates to herself*, it becomes necessary to point to those narrative descriptions of everyday phenomena indicative of the subaltern's way of life. In so doing, we can begin to familiarize ourselves with the color, texture, and length of the threads used to weave narrative tapestries together; tapestries that express how social and historical patterns are entwined into a cohesive 'life story' one already makes sense of.

Broadly speaking, then, this thesis takes up issues in cultural politics brought on by problems in *communication*, specifically between cultures stratified by the Colonial encounter (as in the creation of economically maldeveloped 'Third' and modernized 'First' worlds). It was forged, not as a response to, but as an applied effort to provide a concrete example of what Spivak meant in her landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"⁵ Yet Spivak's provocative response – that *no*, the Subaltern *cannot* speak— is often misunderstood, even by her own account⁶, by many critics to suggest political paralysis rather than a deepening of the question of subaltern agency and communication. It is easily misinterpreted, in part, because it is grounded on a difficult, even more primordial question of how *intelligibility* is possible in the first place. In other words, what makes it possible (or shows up as a *barrier* to the possibility) for the subaltern subject to speak is predicated on what makes it possible for the enunciative acts of *any* human to effectively count as speaking, where speaking is seen as the ability to convey and receive *meaning*.

The problem comes when subaltern subjects, under conditions of historical duress, attempt to speak to other cultures in an effort to preserve life. As Spivak has shown, it is often "the inaccessibility of, or untranslatability from, one mode of discourse in a dispute to another,"⁷ that results in points of intelligibility— nodes in the linguistic exchange that supplant meaning-full dialogue between cultures. This, in turn, opens up the possibility for delegitimizing subaltern speech acts; of reterritorializing their discourse on the basis of master modes of discourse such as "neutral", objective reason. Rather than point to the destabilizing effects produced by foreign ways of understanding, the Western interlocutor in particular⁸, hears by 'picking out' and 'listening for' narrative inconsistencies in terms of *departures* from his own understanding, where his perspective is placed as a centrifuge that separates out vocal matter of different densities—that is, different from his own. Thus, the Western interlocutor often responds to the subversion of his own ways of understanding with yet another life instinct-- by imposing his own networks of signification as if they were *universal* truths. As Walter Benjamin has put it, "truth seems to stand in the way of truth, or more exactly, truth and transmission get in each other's way."⁹

Thus, to approach the question of subaltern discursive practices, or the possibility of the effective existence of such practices, I am simultaneously concerned with the production and reception of meaning as fashioned by culturally-different agents. In other words, I ask, by virtue of what cultural and historical conventions do we register and

convey expressions so that they make sense to us, materializing in the ways one is used to hearing them appear as intelligible? Moreover, the pre-reflective social activities of conveying and receiving meaning also imply the existence of a shared medium through which these actions can take place between speakers and through which a shared intelligibility is made possible: language. Meaning is conveyed through a language which both transmits meaning and constitutes it, thereby making communication possible. With the emphasis on articulating how intelligibility becomes possible, then, I draw from continental philosophy, and especially—but not solely—on Heidegger’s account of intelligibility throughout various points in the thesis.

But to recall the subject matter at hand, it is *subaltern* speaking practices that are of present interest, not interpersonal communication. Thus far, what is being described (and needs to be described first) is how communication is made possible *intraculturally*, a task briefly undertaken within the thesis’ first chapter, entitled *Cross-Cultural Communication and the Principle of Incommensurability*.¹⁰ The title emphasizes the “cross” cultural aspects of communication for the following reason: because the state of Subalternity— seen by Ranajit Guha as a “general name for the attribute of subordination”¹¹— is created through the maintenance of subordinating conditions throughout the postcolonial world, Subalternity is in my view a comparative term between culturally dominant and inferior cultures, where the subaltern are asymmetrically positioned¹² in the latter role. For this reason, I establish the parameters of the overall discussion strictly within the scope of cross-cultural communication, and, more specifically, as it is manifested in subaltern texts; that is, those narrative practices which have been codified into a system of written representation for the purposes of communicating situations of bondage, oppression, or as oppositional supplements to Official colonial representations of subaltern history.

For example, one of the most, if not *the* most, well-known example of subaltern texts to come from Latin America— and also the one taken up throughout this thesis as an exemplar of Spivak’s problematic— is *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y Así Me Nació la Conciencia*, translated into English as *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Edited and compiled by the Venezuelan ethnographer Elizabeth Burgos-Debray, it is the late twentieth-century “testimonial” narrative of Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché Mayan Indian woman who faces persecution, repression and discrimination by virtue of her peripheral position in history. As an indigenous peasant living in a postcolonial territory ravaged by racism against Indians, Menchú can easily be seen as a Subaltern since her situation of enunciation is tied to a historical lack of access to official systems of representation.

Told extemporaneously to Burgos-Debray in several tape-recorded sessions beginning in January of 1982, Menchú describes the brutalizing repression of her indigenous community, including the murder of her family, at the hands of a U.S. backed (and for which former president Clinton has publicly apologized¹³) national government; a repression so widespread and totalizing that the United Nations termed it a “holocaust” in its official human rights report, “Guatemala: Never Again”¹⁴— a report whose author, Bishop Gerardi, was assassinated only forty-eight hours after delivering it.¹⁵

Insofar as the oral narrator of *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú, y Así Me Nació la Conciencia* is interpreted as actively denouncing, objecting and decrying a specific situation and taking a concrete stand against it, it is a text of protest, one that seemed to have achieved its goals of effecting change by “helping to bring about the signing of the peace accords” which ended the violence against her community¹⁶. Because of this, by the early nineties, it *appeared* as if despite being a subaltern voice Menchú was actually being heard, taken seriously, and recognized accordingly; in 1992, on the 500th anniversary of the Conquest, Menchú was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work and activism for indigenous rights.

Coming at a time when multiculturalism and the debates over identity politics were transforming the landscapes of the North American academy, approbating cheers and applause from many of its leading “tenured radicals” followed the broadcasting of the Peace Prize winner. The excitement generated by Menchú’s award soon materialized into a cottage industry of essays, books, conferences, special topic journals and doctoral dissertations over the nature of subaltern narratives, testimonial practice and the insurgent qualities testimonial texts of protest seemed to be capable of producing to effect change. Menchú’s narrative caught on as a concrete example of the ways subaltern subjects can engage in the project of decolonization by— as Edward Said called it in his landmark book, *Orientalism – “unthinking Eurocentrism”*¹⁷. As an oral narrative dictated to a professional interlocutor, typically a western ethnographer, *Testimonio* seemed to be able to bypass many of the literary conventions of humanist writing, namely, those of the bourgeois autobiographic novel and its dependence on the Enlightenment conception of the ‘Self’, of the mentalistic “I” that narrates a life story.

Furthermore, the interpretive response to Menchú’s narrative was coming from a rather interdisciplinary consortium: Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, Political Science, Anthropology, History, and not to mention heavy activity in Foreign Language Departments was taking place. Despite the existence of very real and, at times, heated contentions over the “essential nature” and “proper literary genre” *Testimonio* should belong to, what emerged as the adopted gold standard for interpreting *Testimonio* became the socio-political theorist John Beverley’s account of *Testimonio* as “the powerful affirmation of the [subaltern] speaking subject”¹⁸. Beverley had as his example, at the time he first theorized *Testimonio*, the revolutionary victory of the Sandinistas in the Nicaraguan Revolution and their aesthetic experiments in the ‘democratization of culture’. It was the Nicaraguan and Cuban Revolutions, moreover, which proliferated the use of *Testimonio* as an insurgent cultural apparatus. In fact, by the late eighties the need to critically rethink the genre had waned due to its popular integration into post-revolutionary discourse and practice; in Nicaragua, for example, the period of social-democratic consolidation following the 1979 revolution saw *Testimonio* as a valuable populist tool for talking about one’s revolutionary experiences. By 1996, with the Guatemalan war over, Menchú a celebrated human and indigenous rights activist, and a new topic called “Testimonial Literature” to act as academic cannon fodder for years to come, the pedagogic need to reexamine *Testimonio* was held in abeyance¹⁹ ... and so the cellar door closed.

Had what happened next not occurred, or at least come to my attention, perhaps this thesis might never have been written: the scandalous claim by an American anthropologist that “Rigoberta *lied*” and, owing to this accusation, the subsequent denouncement of Menchú in the front page of the New York Times as a “Tarnished Laureate”. In *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, David Stoll argues that Menchú’s “autobiography” is a series of “fabrications”, “lies”, and “mythic inflations” manipulated to look like ‘facts’ in order to serve the interests of the revolutionary vanguard organization she worked for. Although almost a quarter of a million Guatemalan Indians were incontrovertibly murdered, tortured, widowed or orphaned by the military repression, what is at stake for Stoll is his ability to have reliable indigenous informants, ones that stick to neutral ‘facts’ so that he, the “objective interpreter” can do his job of interpreting their own situation back to them.

In chapter two, called *Letting Context Be: History and the Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, I critique the reception of Menchú’s narrative by Stoll through a threefold argument. First, I present Stoll’s reading of Menchú as an example of how reading texts outside a *historical context* enables detached, instrumental encounters with texts; moreover, I address this tension by providing an in depth, though fundamentally limited description of the historical framework out of which Menchú’s narrative emerges. Secondly, in detailing the semantics of the “controversy” (which is done in chapter three, *To Bear Truthful Witness: David Stoll and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*), I illustrate how in monopolizing the *conditions for credibility* (such as being a “reliable” witness capable of presenting corroborative empirical ‘proof’ of her statements, which must never be contradictory) Stoll co-opts the means of the discursive exchange through which marginalized peoples can have their testimonies taken seriously; he does this by pre-reflectively grounding his own discourse within the framework of a *naturalistic* ontology. As a consequence, Stoll deploys what Ranajit Guha has termed “the prose of counter-insurgency”²⁰ as a symptom of the naturalistic prejudices that devalue socio-historical contexts and culturally normative practices in favor of a positivist view of knowledge.

Thirdly, what I wish to highlight in this chapter is this: in ‘deconstructing’ Menchú’s narrative, what is not often purveyed in the various academic interpretations of the text (especially by Stoll) is that it is also a painstakingly descriptive account of *daily* Quiché life, customs, habits and rituals. They are practices and routines which at times sound so ‘irrelevant’ to the often preconceived “political aim” of the text, or are dissonant to our own way of life, that the tendency to skim over their significance by thinking of them as ‘exotic’ particularities or foreign names arises in our reading practices. The book’s compiler herself notes:

“I initially gave [Menchú] a schematic outline, a chronology: childhood, adolescence, family, involvement in the struggle...As we continued, Rigoberta made more and more digressions, introduced descriptions of cultural practices into her story and generally upset my chronology...the chapters describing ceremonies relating to birth, marriage and harvests did cause some problems, as I somehow had to integrate them into the narrative”.²¹

Yet Menchú's narrative descriptions of ceremonial life constitute more than what is said or, more importantly, what the reader *recognizes* as having been said— as chronological digressions of “picturesque” cultural quotidian unconnected with the human rights denouncement of the Guatemalan military and U.S. government. And yet these descriptions of daily life and ceremonial customs in fact *point to* something more subterranean in postcolonial narratives of protest, something else that does not appear in surface readings as Said: the legacy of colonialism as an ever-present understanding. It is there, between the lines, in the oral devices and the indomitable insistence on talking about everyday practices—because for Menchú *that* is the “I” that is speaking— that one can hear the silences which are always attempting to reach the articulated level of the said, but without an ear for it, fall back into the gaps of the text. These gaps, in turn, are created by the very *event* of reading a culturally-different text; without shared histories or *position* in history, at the moment of reading/listening to the Other we transcode their speech acts by treating it as a mirror to ourselves. Thus, Menchú points to these practices to orient the reader beyond these gaps and towards what she wishes to say since these practices *are* what orient her *own* life; to understand her words is thus to already be at home with her world. And because Stoll and well-meaning North American academics alike are historically positioned in advance in a world with different practices and habits, the world that gets articulated in their critiques and defenses of Menchú is always not-her-world; the subaltern cannot speak *as herself*. To speak, she must become...like us.

In light of this quagmire, by attentively pointing to these descriptions of daily life and oral conventions (such as repetition) in the narrative, I attempt to shift focus away from the runaway train that has become the Stoll-Menchú controversy in academic circles, perhaps most poignantly seen in recent book-length treatments solely focused on the “controversy”²². Staying close to the text will help clarify and situate many of the arguments about “authorship,” “Truth,” “speaking for others,” and “reliability of witnesses” central to the controversy. Furthermore, if these everyday descriptions (such as telling and retelling what she has for breakfast, what she eats for dinner) seem “out of place” in Menchú's narrative it is because our own practices of reading have become conventionalized, organized according to an understanding of ‘text’ and ‘narrative’ where the “story” begins in the first page and ends in the last, without continuation in the social matrix that originally gave rise to it. But all narratives, to recall, are made possible *in virtue of the history* from which they arise. On this view all autobiography is essentially a *social* autobiography, a perspectival narrative grounded on historical frameworks of reference.

Moreover, it is important to note that before the controversy, virtually no philosophical engagement of *testimonio* existed²³ because, for the most part, no one saw a *need* for it. Because we tend to pay attention to what we already understand as mattering, until a controversy arose which *mattered* to the North American academy, little attention was paid to the holistic context and philosophical implications of Menchú's narrative, implications whose subtleties might have helped derail the polarized debate around *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. The question becomes, then, why did our disciplinary interpretive frameworks— however much they may have championed Menchú's narrative and her

right to narrate it—fail to provide a hermeneutics capable of guarding her discursive acts from predictable attempts to delegitimize it? Clearly, as Mary Louise Pratt as argued in the wake of the controversy, “we still lack well-developed theoretical frameworks for specifying what *testimonio* is...the lack of such interpretive and ethical frameworks has left the field open to the application of norms that are irrelevant or arbitrary”.²⁴

This “lack,” in my opinion, was promulgated by our inability to, as it were, *pay close attention* to Menchú’s narrative outside the boundaries of our respective academic projects, and how her text fit or didn’t fit into such projects. With this thesis I attempt to address this gap, albeit paradoxically since I recognize my own interests— derived from my own personal experiences as a transnational Latin American woman— in the deep desire to express oneself verbally, to speak and be heard in one’s *own* terms. As Lyotard has noted, when “a plaintiff is derived of a *means* of arguing” s/he “thereby becomes a victim”.²⁵ But I am aware of this tension, and continue to reengage it again and again in the hopes of staying close to what I actually hear (as dissonant) versus what I think I hear (as familiar) when I listen to the Other.

Thus, in the fourth chapter, *The Small Voice of History: Subalternity and the Latin American Testimonial Narrative*, I situate a more formal analysis of *Testimonio* on the belief that there is no such thing as a neutral or ahistorical standpoint, that understanding can come from anything less than a deep connection with a historical background of social relations which we ‘know,’ not on mentalistic terms, but pre-reflectively in our mundane, everyday acts and practices. In this part, I develop an interpretation of the historical dimension of discursive practices as foundational for any discussion of *Testimonio*, mainly as a way of reinvigorating the conversation about the social and historical preconditions necessary for texts to be seen and interpreted in any one way or another. It is an attempt to rethink testimonial practice, not in the wake of the Stoll-Menchú controversy, but in spite of it.

What arises out of these first four chapters then, collectively, is a tremendous emphasis on the incommensurable nature of cross-cultural exchange; a predicament grounded on the existence of radical differences between cultures, where “difference” is seen as deep immersion into fundamentally different customs, practices, and activities. All of which begs the question: if it is the case that those on the periphery—that is, those on the margins of the social fabric and unrepresented ‘gaps’ in Official History— cannot effectively communicate due to the incommensurable nature of divergent worldviews, how can culturally privileged agents possibly mobilize politically in response to subaltern attempts to vocalize oppression? How can one help, mobilize, *act*?

Mindful of the preeminent status given to political agency in cultural studies, this thesis breaks with the traditional demands of political praxis, and bears the responsibility for doing so, in order to reconnect with certain aspects of existence which have been covered over by the hierarchical binaries of colonialism. As a historical restructuring of social relations, colonialism has destroyed many, if not all, pre-colonial resources of social expression. This loss of linguistic resources, in turn, is invariably reproduced when subaltern subjects attempt to speak through modern narratological conventions: In

short, in gliding between worlds, one with residual traces of understanding and the other with new, master tools for expression, *slippage* occurs—this is a slippage of *meaning*. To be sure, by ‘breaking’ with certain demands for political praxis in interpreting *Testimonio* I do not mean “not concerned with” the same way Spivak is certainly not disinterested in effecting material forces for change. To the contrary, creating conditions for the possibility of effective *political* agency is what I am most concerned with, but it is a task which I think can only be adequately addressed when we come to grips with a background understanding of our own everyday practices, because these practices shape how we engage the Other we believe ourselves to be helping, or trying to help. Rather than hearing what the subaltern speaker is saying, we fall prey to the conventions of our time, our history, and end up affecting their discursive attempts by *resubalternizing* them. The question of political agency is hence a question to be suspended from this thesis, but only in order to investigate what it is that makes the “agency” of the political agent possible to begin with.

Furthermore, I take very seriously the idea that social theorizing can be an impediment for change insofar as it is often jargony, hyper-specialized, and remains at the level of ‘talk,’ or worse, ‘talk about talk’. However, what I find odd is the idea that the urgency of the situation created by colonialism—the situation that Menchú finds herself in—is a distinctly modern emergency. Yes, struggles have intensified, the rise of authoritarian governments and escalations of sectarian violence are engulfing the world stage, with death tolls increasing by the day in Liberia, Chad, the Highlands of Guatemala as in the border city of Juarez, Mexico, where daily disappearances of women fail to make even the back page of our newspapers.

Yet sometimes, in the midst of insurgency, an emergency meeting is needed to reorganize, to take new situations into account (and strategize accordingly), to reassess old assumptions, and converge on an idea which may have always been there, but we lacked the viewpoint to be able to see it as something worth seeing. This is part of oppression, I believe, the limiting of options, particularly with regard to viewpoints. To put it in perspective, “the struggle”, as it stands, has been waged—and is *still* being waged-- for some *five hundred years* now, and yet we are still at a point in our cultural relations that when an indigenous peasant woman speaks of immense suffering, of Amerindian massacres, she is called a liar. The rifle can wait. A meeting must be called.

And so the fifth chapter of this thesis attempts to do just that; to take a breath, a step back, not to *disengage* ourselves from our commitments, from the stands we have taken, but to reassess how we can engage the project of decolonization by dismantling the theoretical attitude of the disengaged spectator, paying careful attention instead to the descriptive accounts of subaltern life. I believe that we cannot stand outside of something we wish to understand; in fact, it is not possible. We must continually ask: can we hear the accounts of the subaltern on their own terms, and if we cannot, as Spivak has suggested, what *can* we do? Even more, *what must one be like* to be able to hear for the unsaid?

I suggest in chapter five, borrowing from phenomenology, that we adopt a method of reading subaltern texts which is continually *on the way*, always unfinished, but pointing towards possible approaches or openings for equitable discursive practices between cultures. On this view, my suggestion emphasizes the importance of continually reengaging our constitutive role as readers. Because, as readers, we actively participate in the constitution of creating openings and spaces in which meaning can emerge, we must recognize that both meaning and text are multiple, not monological. Cultivating multiplicity, that is, the open-ended perspective that ought to orient our reading practices, lets the life of the subaltern *be*: in the way the stories, memories, narrative practices and customs are woven together in patterns distinctive to Subalternity.

And so, *letting be*, on this view, entails more than a type of “imaginative identification” with the Other. It requires an applied phenomenology to the practice of reading and to our own understanding of what a text is. Principally, we must understand what Spivak meant, following Heidegger, by “the *worlding* of worlds” that makes (im)possible genuine cross-cultural communication. In so doing, our goal then ought to be to hearken for, to hear how it is that the Other *relates to herself* by rethinking (and this is one way among many) our current understanding of narratology,²⁶ not in terms of a static structure, but in terms of a dynamic event or *happening*.

The very power of *Testimonio*, originally, was its ability to induce a certain degree of wakefulness in the reader by destabilizing traditional expectations etched out by the canonical text. Narratology, when viewed through the lens of Western epistemic orthodoxies, has temporalized texts as static things, as petrified objects to be manipulated and dissected. Thus, in keeping with the need to pluralize models of engagement with texts, my methodology for this project is drawn from an interdisciplinary constellation of postcolonial and literary theory, history, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and feminism.

To be sure, no *answer* is proposed, no academic dispute adjudicated. What is *affirmed*, however, is a very specific *methodology*; an approach to reading subaltern texts which resists giving answers, much less the ‘right’ one, as it constitutes a continuous, active engagement with texts as living creations. The purpose is to not break contact with the movement of life but to pay attention to the fluidity of life *as it is happening*, and in so doing, mitigate the influence of our Western objectifying tradition.

CHAPTER ONE

Cross-Cultural Communication and the Principle of Incommensurability

“Amerigo Vespucci the voyager arrives from the sea. A crusader standing erect, his body in armor, he bears the European weapons of meaning... This is a writing that conquers. It will use the New World as if it were a blank, ‘savage’ page on which Western desire will be written. It will transform the space of the other into a field of expansion for a system of production.”

-- Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*

Commensurability, it has been said, requires the attuned ear of the Other. In the context of interpersonal communication, commensurability implies that what is being said can be *understood* by the listener as a meaningful connection or association through the usage of a shared metric of conceptual exchange. In Western culture, for instance, this metric is the narrative logic of non-contradiction as a regulatory minimum for communication. To this end, when speech acts are enacted in a culturally homogeneous situation, commensurability is generally made possible by mutual enculturation into collective normative frameworks and discursive standards through which negotiation of differences can take place. And, although the nature of such a normative structure can, by privileging certain identities, itself *limit* the equitable conciliation or preservation of differences (disenfranchising subjects on the basis of sexual orientation, age, or gender), when the speaker and listener are positioned in separate cultures, commensurability becomes particularly difficult. Here, the shared metric of conceptual exchange operative *intraculturally* ceases to function as the commonplace mechanism for signification; because the acts and practices of the foreign culture (which from the standpoint of one's own culture appears as uncanny) may develop resources of expression more at home with those practices—such as paratactic linguistic structures—the very *mechanism of* signification emerges to the foreground of cross-cultural discursive acts, not signification itself. For instance, when one attempts to communicate with a non-native speaker whose replies are in a foreign language, one becomes attentive to the fact *that language* is being used as a communicative instrument.

Subsequent to the unsuccessful transmission of meaning, what is being communicated surfaces to the listener as something altogether different: as an apparent collapse in the listener's fulfillment of an expected meaning...that what is being said has not been understood as something meaningful, but dissonant, strange. And, because language is also informed by the everyday world it names, mouths, and points to, the

more juxtaposed the everyday acts and practices of two cultures are, the more likely *commensurability* between them is (im)possible...cross-cultural communication becomes *incommensurable*.

Moreover, the problem of cross-cultural incommensurability is exponentially intensified when material conditions accelerate the need to urgently communicate a situation of bondage or oppression marked by life and death consequences. In circumstances where the very cause of the oppressive conditions can be traced to the hegemonic, imperialist practices of the dominant culture with whom one is compelled to initiate dialogue *in order to survive*, disequilibrium in the originating 'equality' of speaking positions is created. Thus, the speech acts of the peripheral subject are always already situated in a subordinated relationship to the privileged norms of the dominant culture. When this relationship is no longer dominant, the subaltern subject is no longer speaking *as* a subaltern, and can therefore be heard in a meaningful way through a common metric of expressibility.²⁷ Spivak's famous question of whether the subaltern can speak is answered negatively because of this; if it is meaningful in the normative framework in which the ear of the other is used to listening, then the commensurable nature of the exchange effectively sublimates the differences endemic to the category of subaltern.

When the voice of the speaker is conditioned by a foreign scaffolding of intelligibility, the unfixed ear of the other can only hear what is already intelligible through one's own historical epistemology. By this I simply mean that all of our purported knowledge, whether in the so-called objective sciences or 'common sense,' originates in what is initially *given* to the knowing subject, thus coloring the subsequent nature of the subject's formulation of claims *as a producer* of knowledge in a culture. Consequently, whenever unanimity in a conceptual metric is lacking, the incommensurability of the message is what comes through. But this gap-in-knowledge, however influential a factor in the commensurability of ideas, is not often verbalized or adequately acknowledged in the context of Western communicative theory. In fact, it is so deeply rooted in the Enlightenment project of transhistorical principles of rationality that modern confidence in the factual reproducibility of culturally normative content (through the existence of what appear to be shared discursive *forms*, such as alphabet-based languages) can be misleading, for it does not follow that the normative *value* of the original concept can be perfectly replicated in the foreign epistemic framework of valuation.

As a case in point, in the original Colonial encounter with Mayan culture, the lack of a common metric of expressibility induced in the colonial observer what Heidegger might refer to as a type of 'breakdown' where a sudden fracture in everyday, quotidian familiarity with habitual practices leads to an anxiety-provoking loss of meaning.²⁸ Here, meaning is framed as one's basic orientation in the world—the ability to see an object or experience *as* what one is predisposed to see it as, thus achieving the status of meaning through a fulfillment of expectation. An experience is meaningful because we understand it; we understand it because we have been ushered into a world where the experience in

question already ‘makes sense’ and has not been subject to experiences forcing critical deautomatization of our mode of engagement with our world. Thus, when colonial observers cast their first glance upon the Mayan hieroglyphic codices carved in relief, their anthropological assessment took the following form in the mid-sixteenth century:

“The forms of their letters are nothing like ours, but are much more crooked and entangled, like fishhooks, knots, snares, stars, dice; they are almost meaningless.”²⁹

The narrative logic of Mayan language, if and in what way it would have been conceived by the Mayans, was not communicable to the first colonial observers because, for one thing, their hieroglyphics lacked a visible metric of translatability (perhaps a linear alphabet) for the Spaniards to see it *as* a narrative logic in the first place, much less as what Mayans actually purported the codices to say. However, this misrecognition of meaning can have highly consequential ramifications for the misunderstood speaker, especially when the misrecognition is done by culturally privileged agents with access to the writing instruments of official history. In a recent influential article, “Post/Colonial Toponymy: Writing Forward in Reverse” the cultural anthropologist Quetzil Castañeda cites the naming of the Yucatán peninsular region as a prime example of cross-cultural misrecognition, but one with deep significance to the configuration of postcolonial power relations. He writes:

“The discourse on the naming of the Yucatán has become a topos not only of Yucatán but of Latin American colonial discourse criticism, since it economically marks the complex textual inversion of alterity forged in the encounter between European and Indian.”³⁰

The story of the naming of the Yucatan, he writes, constituted an arbitrary (because it was not seen by the Spaniards *as* arbitrary, but as universal truth) imposition of the Spaniard’s logic of interpretation on Indian words and speech acts. He reproduces Tzvetan Todorov’s (1984) congruent claim that

“when the Spaniards discovered this land, their leader asked the Indians how it was called; as they did not understand him, they said *uuyik a t’aan*, which means, ‘what do you say’ or ‘what do you speak’, that ‘we do not understand you’. And then the Spaniard ordered it set down that it be called *Yucatan*...”³¹

Told in a slight variation, Castañeda writes:

“When the Spaniards landed—landed on this ‘tierra del faisán y venado’ this ‘land of pheasant and deer’—the Indians called it ‘u luum cutz, u luum ceh’; and, when they met the natives who approached, they asked, ‘what is the name of this land?’ Not understanding k’astrant’aan (i.e. Spanish), one Mayan turned to the other and exclaimed, “Uuy ku t’aan!” [Listen how they talk!]³²

As a major outcome of this violent misappropriation of Mayan linguistic expressions, modern Mayans have had to *re-make* intelligible their own world *back* from colonial (mis)translations. Moreover, the Herculean task of *unconcealing* the resources of expression concealed by colonialism is particularly difficult for Mayans because current

expressions—such as the widespread popular use of *Yucatán* to designate an ancestral Mayan dwelling rather than the original “we do not understand you”—have been normativized by official representations of colonial history as foundational facts; namings vested by the Spaniard’s powerful claims of authority to be subsequently certified into timeless, encyclopedic form.

What the Mayans can do, and *have* been doing through examples such as Rigoberta Menchú’s descriptions of ceremonial life and customs, is supplementing official representations of history with what I refer to as historical memory; cultural acts and practices—i.e. a word, festival, dance, gaze, poem, food, or the oral recitation thereof—which call up again and again the significance of certain cultural values through built-in instructions necessary to preserve a culture: how to sing the names of the forefathers, never to step over cornhusks or discard Maize, eating lime instead of fruit, telling the story of the White Man at every ceremony. Thus, for modern Mayans, the word “Yucatan”, or U-kal-peten

“is the name of the *year* when the foreigners arrived, the year one thousand five hundred and nineteen. This was the year when the foreigners arrived, here at our town, (the town) of us Itzá, here in the land of Yucalpeten, Yucatan, in the Mayan Language of the Itzas... This is the year which was current when the foreigners prepared to seize Yucalpeten [Neck-of-the-Land] here. It was known by the priest, the prophet Ah Xupan as he is called”³³

Whereas a dominant culture needs a certain degree of forgetfulness to regenerate, cultures all but dismembered by colonialism must canonize the value of remembering if they are to survive. In this sense, narratives of the Jewish holocaust have a special point of congruence with Mayan narratives; they both serve to re-call again and again a historical event which can never be wrested from near memory, lest their culture face it again. The metonymic value of Mayan narratives, moreover, relies heavily on the force of repetition to facilitate memorization of these value codes.

When placed in this framework, as an event of great epistemic violence, the conquest was characterized by the intercontinental importation of instrumental logic, one that, at the sight of a foreign text with no preassigned meaning in the Spanish language of the colonizers, was set in motion for the purposes of *breaking* the ‘code’ of the Mayans. This will towards authorial representation of the other’s sign and signifiers on our terms, although not unique to Western imperial hubris, is arguably a historical characteristic of the culture. Thus, although there exist those resilient codes such as the Naj Tunich glyphs of Guatemalan Mayan culture (which as of today remain undeciphered but for an eye-blink longer), of the texts which anthropologists have successfully made suddenly ‘intelligible’, little can be made of their *use*, for, as one contemporary anthropologist notes, “lamentably, the Mayan texts we have deciphered so far fail to speak of important things we wish very much to know firsthand—records of trade and commerce, inventories of building materials, listings of agricultural products”³⁴—in other words, things which can be calculated, quantifiably measured, and catalogued according to rules of taxonomical categorization apposite to scientific knowledge.

The history of Latin American narrativity, since the colonial imposition onwards, has been marked by a struggle for reconciling the adequacy of the colonial discourse to address the pre-predicative indigenous world-view in the absence of viable alternatives (in the form of surviving languages). Subaltern discursive norms are always therefore predetermined in advance by a speaking subject's historically marginalized situation of enunciation in what can be described as a "culturally asymmetrical power relation."³⁵ For those on the losing side of the historical equation, then, "as a name for the general attribute of subordination,"³⁶ Ranajit Guha refers to the *subaltern* as the peripherally constructed subjects of history, emphasizing the unbalanced nature of the relation between privileged and marginal declarative authorities. For the post-colonial subject, then, the problem of self-constancy, taking a stand on your own self and culture in order to self-legitimate, is inextricably tied to the past imposition of western culture, the result of which is hybridity and frustration in efforts of decolonization. This is because in order to decolonize, the Latin American post-colonial subject is faced with the daunting task of mobilizing projects of liberation against colonial thinking using the very colonial epistemology which originally constrained one. Some theorists such as Audre Lorde believe this to be the central problem of epistemic decolonization, insofar as "the tools of the master will never dismantle the master's house".³⁷

Because effective communication requires at minimum, the mutual reciprocity of the acknowledgement that both discussants have the right to speak *for themselves*, whether in intersubjective communication or through representative ideological apparatuses such as texts, the problem of how the dominant culture engages, interprets, and defines the subaltern voice as an object of inquiry subject to rules and standards of culturally-dominant knowledge is of primary importance. Thus, when the anthropologist William Haviland, here referring specifically to the Guatemalan Mayan codices, reasserts that "not even the 'glyphs'," as he calls the Mayan's textual production, "speak *for themselves*," and that "we need to check out what they say against the archeological record," he is asserting his right, in the name of the anthropological discipline's scientific preeminence, to interpret Mayan cultural production on his own terms.³⁸ Such a practice is grounded on the belief in the existence of an objective referent, the 'archeological record,' (itself a cultural construction of knowledge by the victors in the colonial imposition) against which the 'truth' of the codices may exist as 'facts'. However, as Ofelia Schutte has pointed out with respect to the "guiding presuppositions" of "Western conceptual orthodoxies" such as those underpinning Haviland's claims,

"Knowledge is not culture-free but determined by the methodologies and data legitimated by dominant cultures. In other words, the scientific practices of a dominant culture are what determine not only the limits of knowledge but who may legitimately participate in the language of science".³⁹

If what constitutes knowledge in the western hegemonic configuration of discourse is adherence to the methodological principles legitimated by the rules of the 'dominant culture', then to what extent can those of the 'subaltern culture', to use Schutte's phraseology, engage in bilateral (that is, equitable) discursive practices across cultures? Surely negotiation cannot take place when one side holds all the cards by legitimating the nature of the instrument through which discussion can take place. But

this is exactly the claim I am making of Western communicative rationality operative in disciplinary frameworks; that it pillars the possibility of disciplinary discourse as a resubalternizing practice which can, in turn, be seen as the prevailing problem governing the declarative legitimacy of the Latin American narrative form known as *Testimonio*.

Testimonio, first coined in the 1960's by the ethnologist Miguel Barnet⁴⁰ as a "first person narrative based on eye witness accounts"⁴¹ has been said to represent "the powerful textual affirmation of the [subaltern] speaking subject"⁴² due principally to the genre's unconventional disavowal of formalist literary devices; the prose is simple, drawing from popular conventions (i.e. the linguistic resources already at hand) in such a way as to produce an oral counter-formalist effect to canonical Western literature. This effect, in turn, has proved helpful to advanced literary theory in deconstructing the ubiquitous authority of master literary narratives such as the bourgeois novel.

And yet, according to Gugelberger, testimonial narratives have been "undergoing a reappropriative process; a transmutation wherein the text's implicit socially situated urgency is supplanted by reducing its functional value to a counter-formalism"⁴³ In wishing to develop more foundational articulations of *Testimonio* as a fixed *form*, scholars of *Testimonio* attempted to establish its definition by ascribing general qualities, properties, and essential attributes such as an "implicit" "socially situated urgency". While this latter attribute may be generally agreeable to many a scholar, especially those concerned with mobilizing projects of liberation, the very act of trying to ascribe permanent qualities to the *mechanism* through which testimonialistas—*narrators of life-stories*— can legitimately speak opened the door for theorists to conflate the "eye witness account" feature with the modern *legal* connotation of giving testimony. This conflation resulted from the transposition of the theorists' own conceptual orthodoxies onto the object of study; to recall Certeau's eloquence, the desire to formalize *Testimonio* using the European tools of colonialism "will transform the space of the other into a field of expansion for a system of production". Hence, giving testimony, the anthropologist David Stoll will insist in his book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, emphasizes what he sees as the fundamental "reportage" or "documentary quality" of the genre. *Testimonialistas* become *givers of testimony* in a subordinate relationship to those taking, recording, and *evaluating* their testimony for credibility and contradiction. Thus, what began as a way to tell a life story, ended up as a way to document Truth—from a way of speaking to a standard for selective listening.

As the *descriptive* telling of a story, it is generally agreed that "traditional testimonial genre began with the chronicles of the conquest," gaining formal articulation only in the twentieth century due to the emergence of the many projects of national liberation and state-building throughout the third world.⁴⁴ However, the difference between the original chronicles of the conquest and the textual production of testimonial literature centers on *who* is doing the speaking; thus the legitimacy of one's position of subjectivity becomes an important question of testimonial literature, and by association, Subaltern Studies. For example, Bartolome de Las Casas' *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*, written in 1540, stands out as perhaps the most well-known chronicled account of the conquest. Here, Las Casas writes as a first person eye-witness, a direct informant to the King of Spain, Charles V, over the

destruction of the Amerindian peoples. As an already-credible European proxy, Las Casas bypasses the corraling placement of the witness stand and can directly (albeit through rhetorical devices) bring suit against what he sees as the Spanish explorers' rapturous violence unbecoming of Christian virtues. To be sure, his claims there were 'no souls left' in the entire islands of Cuba, San Juan [today Puerto Rico] and only about "two hundred souls"⁴⁵ which he and his men could verifiably count, could today be seen as hyperbole; as "mythic inflations" employed as a rhetorical device to speak to the King of Spain in such a way as to get his attention, impress upon him the urgency of the situation, and enliven the King's conscience to intervene in the violence out of duty to Christian mercy and benevolence.

Despite the voluminous scholarship devoted to Las Casas since the text's inception, no scholarly critic to date has impeached Las Casas' entire account of the conquest by ascribing to him the purposeful intention to deceive the people of Spain. And yet, four and a half centuries later, when a Guatemalan Mayan Indian woman, Rigoberta Menchú, acting as an eye-witness to the destruction of her indigenous community, gives her testimony of the violent atrocities against her own people she is accused of "mythic inflations" of the very "facts" she purports to narrate, evoking a response from many critics to label her entire story "a fraud"⁴⁶.

The most evident difference between Menchú and Las Casas, then, is their cultural status as speakers; in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Menchú is speaking *as* the native informant *herself*. To this end, what has become ossified since the conquest, mostly in ways which are no longer transparent, is the operative logic of our discursive norms—namely, the logic of Western conceptual orthodoxies as calcified through the victorious history of the West in the paradigm of colonialism. The journalist-turned-anthropologist David Stoll is shaped by this very framework of intelligibility to the extent that he is insisting on the supervenience of the verification theory over the claims made by subalterns; what is at stake is the prevailing of ways to objectively verify truth, to distinguish between fact and falsehood through the use of research methods that seek out the empirically verifiable. What is largely lost, however, is the understanding that how it is a memory gets encoded depends largely on the penumbral juncture of psychological, material, and linguistic forces already present in the subject's framework of intelligibility, for Stoll as for Menchú. Rather than striving for recognition that a subject in distress is urgently trying to communicate, asking us to pay attention, Stoll's ear reaches for the fulfillment of expectation through the largely incommensurable textual representation of Menchú's conceptual framework. He fails and in response flees from anxiety by retrofitting her testimony to fit his expectations. He does this the only way he can: to point out what *he sees* as logical contradictions.

Under such pressing circumstances, the context of inter-cultural communication in Latin America and the third world has tended to take on a historically-deterministic (many times Marxist) framework of the *political*. In an effort to avert inaction resulting from discourses which stay at the level of theory, of 'talk about talk,' cultural theoreticians such as John Beverley respond to the question "who are we to believe," Menchú's story or Stoll's version—the incriminating accusations of the oppressed or the exculpating evidence of the oppressors—not with a critical evaluation of culturally-

specific socio-historical frameworks as grounds for understanding the inequity of the relationship, but with a construction of subaltern discourse that is structurally political. For this reason Beverley sees testimonial literature as a form of resistance, as an ideological apparatus which can act as a viable force to effect material change. But change can take many forms aside from visible material change; structural change for instance may necessitate an understanding of the nature of the many ideological forces which influence our self-identification and psychological formation *as* ‘political subjects’.

However, Beverley’s resolute claim that the solution to the problems afflicting third world peripheral subjects “will in the end be decided on *political* rather than epistemological grounds”⁴⁷ is partly right; the auratization of epistemology as the essential backdrop against which our knowledge of the world, understanding of conditions, and ideas emerge makes possible the very stance of the detached, neutral spectator so injurious to our attentiveness of lived experience. But whereas settling a dispute on ‘epistemic grounds’ is really not settling anything specific but rather transpositioning the discourse of the dispute according to one epistemic convention or another, what *can* be of assistance is a view of epistemic frameworks as products of particular historical paradigms such as humanism or colonialism.

Such paradigms, like the principles of the Enlightenment, are never transcendental, but derivative of an eventful convergence of very specific social and political matrixes indicative of a culture. And while we can adopt many of these paradigms as useful, practical metaphors, if we understand “political” to mean taking a non-disinterested stand towards a desired outcome—a stand that involves voicing support or opposition of ideas, policies or conditions through various cultural mechanisms—then history, on this view, is always political, for it is already laden with all the stands that have been, or are capable of being taken. What does not exist, moreover, is a historical ‘grand design’; a teleological or deterministic truth to human history because history is itself contingent, drawn by flux to produce narratives of slavery, colonialism, and holocausts as well as narratives of science, Renaissance humanism, or empire. But one is not to despair, for the pervasiveness of these narratives can be mitigated by unconcealing the set of assumptions which have made them viable possibilities in the first place: we can still ask; ‘why *this* rather than that,’ to lead us to the most important question: ‘what must a culture *be like* to find one narrative infinitely preferable, to make possible the grafting of one possibility over another and call it “history?”’ In this sense human agents are always at the foreground of historical processes.

Yet what is still being lost is this sense of history as constitutive of our conceptual prejudices. Thus, if awareness is to precede liberation, we must understand ourselves in a manner which will entail accounting for the forces which act back on our choices. Furthermore, politics proper is itself deeply rooted in the disputation of difference; by privileging political engagement through the explicit exclusion of normative frameworks which guide and inform the nature of those differences, Beverley effaces the possibility of accepting different ways of *being* political. It is tantamount to forcing the other to speak only in ways we already find meaningful (by way of monopolizing what counts as discourse) and is itself an act that reproduces subalternity by legislating standards.

Caught in the midst of those standards, Menchú's text has been a site for contention in the North American academy, acting as a polarized battleground over the possibilities, constrains, and politics of cross-cultural communication and multicultural principles. On the one side, David Stoll accuses "Beverley and his colleges have been promoting Testimonio in a way that does not allow questioning its reliability".⁴⁸ Gathering the naming of allies, Beverley responds as follows:

"Spivak is concerned with the way in which elite representation effaces the effective presence of the subaltern. Stoll's case against Menchú is precisely that: a way of, so to speak, resubalternizing a narrative that aspired to (and achieved) hegemony."⁴⁹

But Beverley, as seen earlier, is complicit in this subalternizing practice, although at a much less superficial level than Stoll. Beverley, with all his good intentions (visible through the intensely self-critical nature of his writings) wants to transcend questions of reliability in order to concretize the possibility of an ideological imaginary for international solidarity in liberation movements. But what the patterns of attacking and defending what the subaltern voice *really* means, is capable of meaning, or incapable of communicating is, in a way, reproducing subalternity by legislating through theory how it is the subaltern can, cannot, or ought to speak. There is no way out of is, for every description, every narration, is in essence a selective account of what one chooses to listen for. What is to be done, then? A curative reply would be to affirm the Buberian dictum: "you shall not withhold yourself," and discharge what is best in us, our skepticism of universals, into the task of clarifying what is to be *undone*. In other words, what projects should we take up in order to demystify and fetch out of its state of normalcy the assumptions and prejudices operative when we talk to the other? This is what I take the project of phenomenology to entail; to emphasize the descriptive account over the editorialized narrative, the aggregative over the analytical, the holistic and contextual over the instrumental, yet without invoking binary relations in between. If hearing is something we let happen in contradistinction with something we will to do, as in listening, the opportunities for hearing the subaltern speaker on her own grounds, however dissonant to our ears, will be maximized.

Using the debate crystallized by the emergence of the Latin American testimonial narrative as a counter-hegemonic practice in the twentieth century, one can better see how the imposition of the colonial metric of expressibility (understood herein as the instrumental aspect of Western scientific rationality and the importation of foreign linguistic frameworks) on the narrative logic of subaltern lived experience has provided a normative scaffolding in which cultural practices that create, sustain, and reinscribe subalternity can thrive. The discursive practices of the disciplinary franchise of the North American academy, through the dialectic pendulum of "pro" and "contra" theses (summarily characteristic of the formalist, anthropological and political articulations of Testimonio) promulgate what I call a "monopoly of legitimation" with respect to the theoretical configurations of ideological apparatuses. These disciplinary configurations, through the ossifying nature of their applied everyday practice (from which specialized vocabularies can emerge as the norm) can have the effect of monopolizing what constitutes as "the right way," as a legitimated cultural apparatus through which a subaltern subject can (or is most likely to) attain agency. The end result of which, it can

be argued, is the possible effacement or cultural *concealment* of alternate ways subaltern subjects may self-legitimate in response to the condition of coloniality.

Put in other words, if testimonial discursive practice becomes established, as I argue it has been, as a dominant tool for combating Western cultural hegemony, what then becomes of subjects who cannot openly engage in testimonial discursive practice and must thereby be read for in-between the lines; in the breath, the caesura of the unsaid? In this sense, cross-cultural communication, whether through a narrative text or phonetic vocalization, is about *power*, about how culturally asymmetrical speaker/listener relations are not created, but unconsciously inscribed *through the nature and normative portent* of our *practices*. For this reason, in keeping with the plurality of panoramic perspectives so important to phenomenology, my selective reading of Menchú's narrative as descriptions of everyday Mayan life is not the 'right' way to read her, but remains *only one way* among many, a flash amongst the stars. Let us begin.

CHAPTER TWO

LETTING CONTEXT *BE*: HISTORY AND THE RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ CONTROVERSY

“At a time when rumor, myth, representation and the construction of what we consider ‘real’ pose fascinating issues, it has become all too easy to deprecate the task of separating truth from falsehood, deferring instead to the authority of fashionable forms of victimhood.”

--David Stoll, *Rigoberta Mernchú and he Story of All Poor Guatemalans*

“Perhaps the proper question of someone who has not been allowed to be the subject of history is to say: What is man that he was obliged to produce such a text of history?”

-- Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*

In order to reconnect with a non-instrumental, contextual approach to reading Rigoberta Menchú’s narrative it is essential to come to grips with the historical terrain from which it emerges. This involves accounting for colonialism’s effect on Mayan culture (an effect which shows up in her narrative as a constant concern with cultivating cultural practices) and secondly, for the more recent armed conflict in Guatemalan history— a conflict that led to, among other things, the murder of Menchú’s family. It is only when these conditions have come into focus for the reader that a clearer, more perspectival view of the Stoll-Menchú controversy can emerge.

To begin, in Mesoamerica, which consists of the central and lower regions of modern Mexico and Central America, three ethnic groups prevailed during the pre-colonial period: The Aztecs, Mayans, and the Olmecs, also the oldest. Although all three groups were stratified by great linguistic diversity and virtually no centralized systems of power, they shared a common narrative in colonialism⁵⁰. During what is known as the Classical Era (250 – 900 A.D.), these civilizations coexisted through both stable and warring relations, producing cultures steeped in social interactions and ceremonial life. As a resource of expression, one often used to codify official narratives, Mayan civilization also possessed a paratactic system of written communication. Mayan codices, akin to Cuneiform or Sumerian, utilized a basic unit of writing known as a ‘glyph’; collectively, these glyphs expressed in detail, among other things, Mayan cosmological descriptions, many of which anthropologists have struggled to decode insofar as they

resist translation into modern syntactical systems of language. The difficulty also lies in that many of the codices were not read, but *sung*.

However, near the end of the Post-Classic period (900 – 1540 ad), habitual Post-Classic Mayan life and culture practically collapsed⁵¹ in the wake of the colonial encounter. The Colonial Period in Mesoamerica does not begin with the customary date of 1492 because, although Columbus' first voyage to the 'New World' took place that year, Hernan Cortez did not arrive in Mexico until 1519, conquering Mexico City two years later in 1521. It was this decade (1520's) that saw the invasion of Menchú's ancestral Guatemala and Central America.

In order to conquer over what they saw as a worldview deviating from the norms of the Western civilizing mission, the raze-and-burn cultural policy administered by the Spaniards saw to it that any visible evidence of habitual ways of Mayan life were uprooted: whether through the destruction of temples, murder of Mayan elite, or imposition of a monolithic, foreign language. Moreover, the execution of Mayan kings and elite signified, for the culture, the profound loss of a traditional point of reference in social relations, making it difficult for survivors to resituate their identity following the conquest. As the Guatemalan scholar Arturo Arias has noted,

“When the Spaniards conquered Guatemala in the early sixteenth century...they executed the entire Mayan elite. In one of history's first holocausts, it is estimated that as many as two and a half million Mayans died in the fifty years following the conquest.”⁵²

Yet of those who survived, without their language or rituals to practice, modern Mayans were, metaphorically speaking, already dead. It is this 'historical memory' over the death of important cultural practices, as we shall see later, that becomes critical in understanding Menchú's often-cited emphasis on “secrets.”

During the colonial period, a new system of social relations emerged based on powerfully hierarchical and exclusionary structures. Unlike Mayan hierarchies and priestly cast systems of the Classical and Post-Classical Era, which required increasing degrees of self-sacrifice the *higher* up one stood in society, the Spanish system of identity classification rested on notions of biological and, more importantly, geographic *origin*. Resting on a subject-object dichotomy, power structures in the New World were thus upturned from their traditional basis in obligation *to* others, to privilege *over* others; from communal obligation to the tribal unit, to respite *from* communal obligation based solely on a higher social standing. One of the lasting ramifications of this historical shift in communal relations and responsibility can be seen today in the “culture of indemnity” propagated by 20th century Latin American dictators and the military.

Thus, in the early sixteenth century, at the top of the totem pole, looking down, sat social groups composed of Spaniards born in Spain, followed by the first generation of New World-born Spaniards, called *criollos*. And, since women did not accompany the original conquerors to the New World, those born of the union between Spaniards and

Indians became known as mestizo(a)s, a mixed, lower-ranked race which became the biological foundation for Latin America's non-Indian population, also known today as *Ladinos*. After mestizos, were Indians, survivors of the conquest, followed only by African slaves imported by Spaniards for labor.

At this same time the king of Spain began sending viceroys, colonial administrators, to look after the interests of the Spanish empire in the newly conquered territories. The administrative tools they brought with them consisted of new political, religious, and linguistic systems, all of which became key in homogenizing the Amerindian diversity of the region. To this end, it has been said that to master a people you must take away their language. In this manner, the imposition of Castilian became a tool for oppression because it excluded other languages, other resources of expression more at home with lived Amerindian experience. To be clear, there is no such thing as an organic "Spanish language" native to Latin America; it is the Spanish crown's importation of *Castilian*, which was said to be made from a pure form of Latin, that gave the Americas "Spanish". Thus, the Latinization of the Americas by colonialism gave way to the reconstitution of the region as "Latin America".⁵³ The effect of this historical event on subaltern systems of signification, as will be seen, is often occluded from surface view, but is nonetheless profoundly present in subaltern discursive practices.

Geopolitically, similar to Africa's experience with Colonialism, regions were arbitrarily reorganized along the creation of viceroalties, also known as *audiencias*, or political districts. The Guatemalan *audiencia* was first composed of contemporary Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. Yet the political configuration of Guatemala, today, is shaped less by its geopolitical boundaries than by its demographics; of the surviving legions of Mayans (which now reside throughout Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, Southern Mexico and the Yucatan Peninsula) the highest concentration live in the central and western highlands of Guatemala, the area where Menchú is from. In fact, of the eleven million people living in Guatemala today, over half are Mayan.⁵⁴ Thus, the plight of indigenous peoples, of descendants from survivors of the colonial holocaust, is closely linked with the history and fate of Guatemala.

In Guatemala, the period between the conquest and state independence—the official date for the closing of the colonial period, and the beginning of the post-colonial era— was marked by the institutionalization of racism and oppression against Mayans. Replacing African slave labor, after 1871, "Mayans were forced by Ladinos to work against their will in the coffee plantations,"⁵⁵ despite the fact slavery had already been abolished in the region. Furthermore, from 1871 until the 1940's liberals governed Guatemala, albeit only on paper. In practice, however, it was just the opposite; under the guise of liberal reforms, president Justino Rufino Barrios (1873 – 1885) expropriated large tracts of land from Mayans to parcel out to private owners. As a fundamentally agrarian culture whose entire civilization centered on agricultural practices (as evidenced by their astonishingly accurate calendars) the theft of land by Ladinos and Spaniards became a pivotal part of Mayan historical memory. The conflict over the "land question", furthermore, underpins Menchú's narrative and must therefore be explored in a historical perspective.

Under the new feudalist system of *latifundium*, the haciendas where Indians had been forced to live also became the sole property of *Ladinos*. Without land of their own, or property to their name, in order to live Mayans became indentured to the hacienda landowners, in effect creating a system of slavery. This structure then became ossified through successive governmental policies aimed at maintaining the current cast system in place. Particularly, during President Manuel Estrada Cabrera's (1898-1920) term in office, Guatemalan wealth intensified due largely to the increased productivity in large farm holdings, called *fincas*; a feat made possible only through the exploitation of Indian labor.

Moreover, the transformation of Mayan labor from traditional collectivist frameworks to bonded labor, and finally, to wage-labor, set the stage for Indian's receptivity towards ideologies based on social solidarity and organization. Unionization, in particular, became an increasingly important part of the econo-political landscape throughout the 1920s, culminating by the 1960's in the establishment of organized indigenous labor movements such as the Peasant Unity Committee, of which Menchú's father, Vicente Menchú, is reported to be the founder.

In addition, the 1920's and 30's were pivotal periods in Guatemala for two reasons. First, the economic infrastructure built by profit-oriented Ladino elites during this time made the country highly susceptible to influence by foreign markets. Because of the topographical make-up and location of Guatemala, the country was well-suited for agricultural production. However, rather than engaging in a diversified agricultural system landowners maximized profit by streamlining production along a single crop or two. Under pressure by the United States to produce raw, unfinished materials necessary for manufacturing refined goods (where most profits lie), just as Cuba made sugar, Guatemala made coffee and bananas. In fact, an astonishing eighty percent of the national economy was based on these two crops alone. This type of import substitution economy, where countries (usually those with a lower developmental standing, as in "third world") concentrate resources in order to produce a few, if not a single crop for exportation to "first world" importers, acquired the economic term "banana republic" to designate national overdependence on a single crop.

Most aptly suited to Guatemala, banana republics also became highly vulnerable to the economic whims of importers, who, as bulk buyers, set the price of goods. Furthermore, consolidating resources into a single national product meant that to obtain equipment and machinery necessary to support production, primary-good producing countries would have to *import* all of their refined goods back from abroad. Beginning in the 1940's, the "dependency theory" used to characterize Latin America by economists consisted in highlighting the subordinated role of the primary-good producing country to the import country, typically the United States. According to dependency theory, while only a few elite and government officials grew rich in the banana republics, the import country reaped a disproportionate economic advantage. It maximized profits through several mechanisms, such as having a constant supply of cheap raw materials, a ready-made market for exporting refined goods, and an expansive platform for expanding

private-sector interests. This included large, private business holdings of foreign capital, land, and infrastructure.

As would be expected, in 1929, following the collapse of the American stock market, a severe unemployment crisis swept through Latin America that set in motion certain material conditions ripe for protest. The sudden drop in American purchasing power sent the price of crops crashing, creating massive agricultural lay-offs throughout the region. It was partly in response to this economic crisis that the first ideological seeds of communism began to be harvested in Central America.

The emergences of communist ideas in Guatemala, however, were perceived as a direct threat to American business interests and to the Guatemalan elite which supported their own social standing through those interests. For this reason, under the U.S.-backed presidency of Jorge Ubico (1931-1944) Guatemalan labor movements saw the most widespread repression since the institutionalization of slavery in colonial times.

With the rapid intensification of labor protests, wide-spread calls for social reform and against the repression, Ubico's dictatorship was toppled only through a full-blown revolution (1944-1955). It was at this tumultuous moment in Guatemalan history that Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán (1950-54) entered the political arena. It is also the point where the specific political conditions giving rise to three decades of internal war—the war Menchú's narrative depicts—began.

By the 1940's over forty percent of all arable land in Guatemala, as well as nearly all of the country's railroads, were owned by the United States. The American company, United Fruit, the largest produce company in the country, had amassed a fortune in foreign interests throughout the first half of the twentieth century in Central America, specifically in Guatemala. Its largest individual shareholder also happened to be the brother of the sitting American Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. Jacobo Arbenz, Guatemala's first and only democratically-elected president, was feared by the United Fruit Company to be a communist due to his campaign platform for agrarian reform.

Understanding the long history of conflict over land in Guatemala, and wishing to rectify the misappropriation of traditional lands from the Mayan Indian majority, Arbenz, in an unprecedented step, reclaimed and nationalized all the land holdings of the UFC and was swiftly denounced by president Eisenhower. Arbenz responded by legalizing the communist party. Then, in 1952, Arbenz instituted the region's first land reform acts since the conquest. Historians of Central America have since tended to agree this move was perhaps the most progressive step towards reconciliation with the Indian communities shattered by colonialism; the period between 1950-54 in Guatemala, however, is often referred to as the "shattered hope," because, as will be quickly seen, it was not to last. In 1954, on Henry Kissinger's orders, and under the approval of President Eisenhower, the CIA led a coup in Guatemala that overthrew Arbenz. Subsequently, the United States replaced him with a series of U.S.-financed and trained military regimes friendly to U.S. interests. Thus began the militarization of the Guatemalan state, and with this shift towards a totalizing centralization of power, also came governmental

corruption, and, more importantly, the institutionalization of repression. As Carol Smith has argued, the situational violence Menchú depicts can be seen as

“a national tragedy that had been brewing since a military government took power in 1954. Military dictatorships motivated various forms of leftist protest, nonviolent as well as violent, and mark the period when death squads began to eliminate political activists, union leaders, indigenous leaders, and Christian Democrats... Racism accounts for the nature of the “final solution” in the 1980’s—the huge massacres of indigenous peoples”⁵⁶.

Wishing to maintain the powerful political clout and standing created by the backing of the United States, after being catapulted into power through the CIA coup, the Guatemalan military began to consolidate power through a counter-revolutionary campaign, persecuting political activists and anyone who “looked” like a communist, or as the military called them, “subversives”. In return, para-military and guerilla organizations (most notably the FAR- Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias) only fought back harder, with the 1944 victory over the Umbico dictatorship still hovering as a near memory. With Arbenz’s visionary land reforms revoked and returned to previous elite owners, rebel forces throughout the country began mobilizing and adopting Marxist ideologies. The government responded by deploying the infamous death squads Smith alludes to throughout areas thought to be ripe for insurgency: namely, in the mountainous highland regions where Mayan villages were located.

By the time General Efraim Montt came to power through an internal coup in 1982, the casualty tolls of Mayan Indians were increasing to the tens of thousands. It was at this time that the violence reached its height; by the close of 1983, almost one hundred thousand Mayan Indians had been assassinated by government forces. At precisely this same moment in history, sitting in a Paris apartment alongside a professional ethnographer, an Indian woman, a refugee from the violence, is telling her story to a tape-recorder:

“My name is Rigoberta Menchú, I am twenty three years old. This is my testimony. I didn’t learn it from a book and I didn’t learn it alone. I’d like to stress that it’s not only *my* life, it’s also the testimony of my people...my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans” (1).¹

It is against the historical backdrop of systematic repression, exploitation, and conflict that Menchú’s narrative emerges. It does not begin on page one, but some five hundred years earlier, when the struggle for survival of her culture began. Owing to the loss of traditional resources of expression and subsequent immersion in life-and-death struggles, Menchú’s narrative should therefore be seen as a text produced *always in the wake of a breakdown in context*, of a collapse in the internal relations definitive of a culture. Those relations, in turn, are synonymous with the cultural practices of a community. No one is more sensitive to this than those intimately affected by the

¹ For practical purposes, I utilize the parenthetical numbering format specifically when referencing *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. All added emphases are noted.

disintegration of world-defining practices: “We survive because of our communities,” says Menchú (158), and caring for those communities means having to cultivate ceremonial and linguistic practices—things that cannot be propagated by genetic codes alone— since “there are Indians who don’t wear Indian clothes and have forgotten their languages, so they are not considered Indians” (167). Dressing in indigenous garments may seem inconsequential to a foreign observer of Mayan culture, but their clothing is as significant to them as texts are to any chirographic culture: “We express ourselves through our designs, though our dress,” says Menchú “—our huipil for instance, is like an image of our ancestors” (81). And, because every ethnic group has a particular ancestral history, then “naturally, each ethnic group has its own forms of expression. Other groups have different customs from ours. The meaning of their weaving patterns, for example”(16).

Whereas the first colonial observers ardently tried to extract narrative continuity from structures that most resembled recognizable forms of writing, as in the carved codices, Mayans encoded their sense of history in more practical, seemingly mundane places: their weaving, games, dances, songs, calendars and ceremonies. In the section entitled “close to the human lifeworld” from *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong cites the primacy of the practical, *lived* world, as the basis for expression in dominantly oral cultures:

“In the absence of elaborate analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience, oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all their knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings. A chirographic (writing) culture and even more a typographic (print) culture can distance and in a way denature even the human, itemizing such things as the names of leaders and political divisions in abstract, neutral lists entirely devoid of a human action context”⁵⁷

Accordingly, when Menchú makes remarks such as: “It’s like expressing ourselves through a tree, for example; we believe that tree is a being...” (80), or that “we don’t actually have the word for God” (13) but dozens of words for maize [corn], it is easy to see how the concrete life-world Ong speaks of could be the conceptual basis for an oral, indigenous culture. Moreover, Ong’s analysis also proves helpful in emphasizing *difference* in comparative cultural analyses. To gain insight into an Indian perspective on the conquest, for instance, one ought to consult not a text, but *The Dance of the Conquest*, which according to Menchú “gives an exact meaning to what Indians think about the Conquest” (206). Of course, only an Indian can access that ‘exact’ meaning by virtue of *growing into* an understanding of the dance, and through dancing it itself. What is more, developing a sense of communal closeness for Mayans does not happen by possessing identical belief systems with other Indians, as in the Catholic Action’s religious tenets, but by sharing peculiar *practices* and habits; as Menchú puts it, “we can only love a person who eats what we eat” (203).

Likewise, because of the importation of different colonial metrics of expressibility on Amerindian linguistic practices, Menchú contends, “I came across

linguistic barriers over and over again. We [Indians of different groups] couldn't understand each other and I wanted so much to talk to everybody and feel close...but I couldn't talk to them because they didn't understand me and I didn't understand them”(164). Menchú attacked the problem in the following manner: “I asked them: ‘what do you eat? How do you make your breakfast? What do you have for lunch? What do you eat for supper?’ And yes, they said the same: ‘Well, in the morning we eat tortillas and salt and a little pinol... at night we eat chile with tortillas, and then we go to sleep,” leading her to conclude “so *everything* was the same” (118). They understood each other, Menchú recounts, by describing things close to the “human lifeworld,” to use Ong’s term. Yet the descriptions would not have achieved resonance in Menchú’s ear had she not *already* grown into the meaning of those descriptions through everyday practice, through a lived understanding of what is being described.

Additionally, for Mayans to consider themselves Mayans, they must not only dress in Indian costume but speak *as* Indians speak; in other words, “everything has to be in our language” (81). This is why “in the East [of Guatemala] there are no Indians now,” not because indigenous bloodlines have dried out, but because “the Indians there have forgotten their costumes, their languages. They no longer speak Indian languages” (169). What’s more, educating Mayan children meant teaching “them to speak *as* we spoke in our language” (120), connoting one should not only use the local dialect, but also employ conventional speaking practices, such as listening attentively versus speaking only to hear one’s own reply. Because oral cultures transmit knowledge through memorization (made possible by repetition and mnemonic devices), listeners in a linguistic exchange must pay careful attention to what the speaker is saying in order to be able to repeat it. Whereas reciting ancestral prayers is trouble-free because they are “prayers which have been known to us for a long time—a very, very long time” (57), learning new prayers “is twice the work for us” (81) since it requires more work; similarly, says Menchú, “we have a lot of problems playing new songs because we have to memorize them” (85). Yet this emphasis on the memorization of prayers and song is not without context; it calls our attention to the handy *function* they serve— in part, as a “recalling [of] history, and, in part, a call to awareness” (67) of the need to preserve Mayan culture. As an “immutable way of keeping our ancestors’ intermediaries alive,” (80) i.e. as handed-down instructions for the practice and maintenance of their customs, song and prayer became cornerstones of Mayan ceremonial life in the wake of the Colonial encounter.

Without question, as with the Colonial era, the most significant effect of the Guatemalan civil war on Mayan Indians became the stoppage of cultural practices due to disruptive material conditions hostile to conducting ceremonies and to the simultaneous loss of many expressive resources resultant from the imposition of foreign cultural tools as earlier outlined. Menchú attests to the fact “many villages in El Quiché were unable to perform their ceremonies because they were persecuted or because they were called subversives and communists” (160). When the violence reached her home province of El Quiché in the seventies and intensified into the early eighties, “during all this time” Menchú recalls, “we couldn’t celebrate our culture; none of our ceremonies” (107). This led to a profound state of anxiety for Menchú “because the concept our ancestors had was that our race must not die out and we must follow our traditions and customs as they did”

(223). This concern with the ability to practice everyday customs is a principal (albeit overwhelmingly under-explored) theme of her narrative. She says, again: “I was very concerned that everything handed down from our ancestors should still be practiced” (149) because they provide a contextual dimension to experience, which in effect, makes experiences *meaningful*.

Marriage, birth, and death ceremonies, to illustrate the point, were instrumental in carrying on meaningful Mayan practices as cultural and historical referents. The birth ceremonies, for instance, are a time “to remind [children] that our ancestors were dishonored by the white man, by colonization. But they [the communal parents] don’t tell them the way that it’s written in books, because the majority of Indians can’t read or write, and don’t even know that they have their own texts. No, they learn it through oral recommendations, the way it has been handed down through the generations (13). Books can be burned, destroyed, limestone codices toppled, but oral narrative practices need only be encoded in the memory, a device kept alive through reengaging narratives in the course of everyday practical encounters, including cyclical ritual observances. Menchú explains these latter practices serve a dual function, not only to pass prescriptive information along, but “also [as] something of a criticism of humanity, and the many people who have forsaken their traditions” (12). Henceforth, to be an Indian in a recognizable way is to partake in the many shared forms of practical understanding carried forth by ancestral teachings. This is why the death ceremonies are of particular importance. Menchú notes, an Indian, “at the moment he is going to die...makes his last recommendations [to their community]...and at the same time gives them the secret of their ancestors, their own experiences, their reflections. He tells them his secrets...that is, everything that is handed down through the generations to preserve Indian culture” (201). Yet since the war began “[death] rituals cannot be performed for a dying person in the mountains where conditions make it difficult” (203), all leading to a violent disruption of centrifugal points of cultural reference. The eruption of seismic conditions in world-defining practices induced survivalist responses from Menchú’s people; their objectives therefore turned from sustaining levels of normalcy in daily life, *in spite of* turbulent conditions, to a new code: First, preserve life, preserve customs only if the former is attained. Thus, as Menchú tells it, the heart-rendering decision came down from her community: “we would forget our customs, our ceremonies, for a while, and plan our security first” (125). She follows: “we broke with many of our cultural procedures by doing this, but we knew it was the only way to save ourselves” (128).

The aim of her struggle against ‘oppression,’ then, can be seen as even more elemental than a war against political repression, of respite from material violence. No, “We wanted change so that we could express our feelings and conduct our ceremonies again the way we used to, because at the time there was no possibility of doing so” (155). Without these ceremonies, the Mayans would live, but they would not survive beyond the present generation. That is, the survivors encoded with Mayan ‘bloodlines’ would no longer be what it *means to be* a Mayan Indian. The notion of personal identity based on ‘blood’ and spatial “origin,” to recall, came with the conceptual framework of the European *Spaniards*, and was not endemic to Mayan culture. Even their priestly cast systems and ancient royal bloodlines were determined by a multiplicity of factors

commensurate with what it meant to be of royal origin; erudite knowledge of ancestral heritage, the ability to recite traditional prayers, to accurately predict droughts foretold by astronomical calendars, interpret astral signs, eat the foods of the Royals, or even perform timely acts of self-bleeding and self-sacrifice. Unlike the Spaniard's system of identity classification, one could easily become not-of-royal-blood in the Mayan world.

With regards to the under-explored “theme,” to use literary terms, of everyday customs in her narrative, several ‘political’ analyses of the text have tended to focus instead on Menchú's articulation of material conditions of strife. For example, “[the kingdom of god] will exist only when we all have enough to eat (134), is frequently cited in studies of Menchú's *testimonio*’; it is also commonly appended to her proclamation: “[I’ve] been radicalized by the malnutrition which I, as an Indian, have seen and experienced. And by the exploitation and discrimination which I’ve felt in the flesh” (247). The succeeding lines are all too often omitted from citation: “and by the oppression which prevents us from performing our ceremonies, and shows no respect for our way of life, the way we are”(ibid).

The ramifications of not integrating Menchú's concern for listening to “the way we are” can prove far reaching, especially in constructing an adequate answer to the question, ‘what is to be our response,’ or, put otherwise, ‘how can we help?’. Because one tends to hear what one is already used to hearing, when formulating a response to Menchú from the North, the ear of the disciplinary paradigm one is accustomed to hearing with often prevails. This is to say, if the theoretical framework one has grown into privileges a hermeneutics based on material economic conditions, as in classical Marxism, or in empirically verifiable, objective ‘truth’, as in journalism, such will be the fate of the narrative that is being appropriated—the lines according to which what is being said, will actually be heard.

To be fair, listening for something other than what one is used to hearing (i.e. for the unsaid rather than the Said) is a relatively difficult endeavor, particularly when even close readings of texts seem to point one along a familiar, well-worn path. For instance, the most typical way Menchú's text has been read prior to the Stoll controversy—which we will develop in a moment—is through the conjunctive paradigm of literature and politics (especially Marxism). Critics such as Beverley attempted to construct a working definition for the classification of Menchú's narrative as *testimonio*, “a new form of narrative literature in which we can at the same time witness and be a part of the emerging culture of an international proletarian/popular-democratic subject in its period of ascendancy.”⁵⁸ Beverley continues:

“Testimonio is implicitly or explicitly...“resistance literature”... The complicity a testimonio establishes with its readers involves their identification—by engaging their sense of ethics and justice—with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience. Testimonio in this sense has been important in maintaining and developing the practice of international human rights and solidarity movements. It is also a way of putting on the agenda, within a given country, problems of poverty and oppression.”⁵⁹

Consider how Beverley might have easily arrived at such conclusions (and justifiably so, since there is no single, monolithic or 'right' way to hear her narrative); "I was fighting for a people and for many children who hadn't anything to eat" (224), Menchú declares. Her struggle "is a struggle of hunger and poverty...neither the government or imperialism can say: 'Don't be hungry,' when we are all dying of hunger" (135). Moreover, an analysis of the narrative based on reading for material, exploitative conditions that exacerbate violence is not at all without merit; Menchú often interjects that "people die early because of the conditions we live in" (144). She gives the following illustration:

"we [Indians] sleep in the same clothes we work in. that's why society rejects us. Me, I felt this rejection very personally, deep inside me. They say we Indians are dirty, but it's our circumstances which force us to be like that" (48).

In addition, she goes on to say, "it was not only now that we were being killed; they had been killing us since we were children, through malnutrition, hunger, poverty," (116) which led her to make the aforementioned remark: "[the kingdom of god] will exist only when we all have enough to eat, when our children, brothers, parents don't have to die from hunger and malnutrition" (134). Regarding the Indians who died in the occupation of the Spanish embassy (her father included), Menchú explains: "all they wanted was enough to live on" (185). And so throughout her narrative she comes back to, again and again, the insistence on the subjugating nature of material conditions: "as I said, and I say it again, it is not fate which makes us poor" (133).

To be sure, Menchú's assertion that "our dedication to the struggle is a reaction against it, against all the suffering we endure" (203) evokes a certain sense of continual physical strife, but it is due to the aggregate effect the repetition of "hunger" and "poverty" have on the reader since these are all concrete, already-recognizable ways of conceptualizing 'suffering'. The reader expects a sense of "desperation" to follow, and so one reads for that: "What were we to do?," she says, "this made me very angry and I asked myself what else could we do in life? I couldn't see any way of avoiding living as everyone else did, and suffering like they did. I was very anxious" (89). Menchú then recalls the time she said, "Mother, I don't want to live, why didn't I die when I was little? How can we go on living?" (ibid) Yet in these latter passages the connotation is not just the endurance of physical suffering, but the absence of traditional points of reference for living that ground existence—habits that instill a sense of normalcy and levity (in that one forgets *what* one is doing at the present moment and by virtue of that acts effortlessly). In the wake of this dis-orientation, one is suddenly aroused to what is actually going on around one, with the disorientation giving way to "anxiety". "I had lost my energy with all the worries I'd had...everything was piling up together: it was all on top of me" (239), she says. If we selectively point to the parts of her narrative that fit pre-conceived articulations of the testimonial genre, such as the narrative of hunger alone, perhaps the call to hear *how* one is what one is—the things that make up Indian identity and therefore must be preserved—can be lost, falling in deaf ears. She almost needs to

shout it: “why don’t outsiders accept Indian ways? *This* is where discrimination lies!” (122).

It is crucial to be able to see how reading a narrative without a contextual backdrop of preexisting socio-historical relations obfuscates the way in which the narrator relates to herself, that is to say, how one produces meaningful patterns of association, as in what it means to be ‘Indian’. An ‘outsider’ to this pre-existing nexus of relations in a culture will not be able to “accept Indian ways” because they will not even *know to look* for the differences which constitute “Indian ways”, meaning their understanding of “difference” is *already* construed as something intelligible, not-uncanny, and manageable enough to weave effortlessly as a representative image of the native in academic debates and papers. If we actually understood the native as different, we would begin to talk about her by becoming silent.

Another prime example of how ‘outsiders’ have constructed intelligible accounts of the ‘way of the native,’— i.e. *as* what the native actually means to say or do— is through Menchú’s account of “secrets”. It is a difficult critique to embark upon, mainly due to the impeccable research methods and analytic rigor of the critics from whom they emanate, such as the Harvard literary critic, Doris Sommer—whose metacritical breadth is admirable, if not beyond reproach. Yet it can be of significant value to show how easy it is for Western interlocutors to listen selectively (because, to remember, the hermeneutic situation is inextricable from what it means to be human—even for myself) for the already-familiar. By offering an instantiation of the interpretive instinct by even the most self-critical of academics, it is possible to deflate in advance many of David Stoll’s vitriolic attacks on Menchú’s text (insofar as they are symptoms of one particular way of looking at the world).

In her article “No Secrets for Rigoberta” and in a later expanded version, “Las Casas’s Lies and Other Language Games,” Doris Sommer argues Menchú’s use of “secrets” in her narrative is a “rhetorical technique” aimed at “keeping readers from knowing her too well”; it is a “decidedly fictional performance” on Menchú’s part, an intentional ruse deployed so that “she keeps reminding readers that we are too foreign to presume to analyze her world, certainly too ill-informed to solve its problems...[it is] Rigoberta’s game of distancing readers to a point from which they cannot possibly offer advice”.⁶⁰ She continues:

“keeping secrets is her most significant language game, I believe. Rigoberta Menchú’s secrets astonished me when I read her testimonial in the early 1980s. Her secrets stopped me then, and instruct me now, whatever the validity of the information or the authenticity of the informant. Why should she make so much of keeping secrets instead of just keeping quiet? I wondered. And why do these cultural secrets matter, if they have no apparent military or strategic value in this denunciation of Indian removal politics in Guatemala? Here is an expose that refuses to share information. The dissonance raised a question about Rigoberta:... was she being coy on the witness stand, exercising control over apparently irrelevant information, perhaps to produce her own strategic version of the truth?”⁶¹

And yet, as mentioned earlier, if we carry forth an understanding of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* as a narrative produced *always in the wake of a breakdown in context*— of a collapse of worldhood from the colonial encounter onwards— then in our reading of Menchú’s narrative another interpretation of Menchú’s “secrets” can emerge, one that discounts the image of a ‘coy Rigoberta’. Firstly, Menchú’s ‘secrets’ are not a rhetorical device to captivate the reader; no, through ‘secrets’ Menchú is recording the history of a culture on the verge of extinction— hence her insistence on talking about everyday cultural practices that preserve the Mayan worldview. Moreover, with the situation growing worse by the moment, she must do this by any means necessary, including utilizing foreign networks of expressions which are almost certain to distort the message. Sommer is right in that Mayans keep secrets from ‘outsiders’:

“We have hidden our identity because we needed to resist, we wanted to protect what governments have wanted to take away from us. They have tried to take our things away and impose others on us, be it through religion, through dividing up the land, through schools...through all things modern” (171).

“And this is why Indians are thought to be stupid” says Menchú “they can’t think, they don’t know anything, they say” (ibid). But Sommer’s claim secrets “have no apparent military or strategic value in this denunciation of Indian removal politics in Guatemala,” I think, is misbegotten; it has *everything* to do with the denunciation. As we shall see momentarily, without the violence enacted upon the Mayans on behalf of ‘Indian-removal politics’, there would be no need to talk about “secrets”. This is because by “secrets” Menchú is talking about *customs*, about everyday practical knowledge: it is not, as Sommer contends, a rhetorical “method” on Menchú’s part. Rather, it is a type of recipe, if you will, or instruction booklet for everyday Mayan cultural practices and values. Without these guidelines, the center of Mayan life begins to loosen. Keeping secrets, Menchú tells,

“is part of the reserve that we’ve maintained to defend our customs and our culture. Indians have been very careful not to disclose any details of their communities, and the community does not allow them to talk about Indian things. I too must abide by this. This is because many religious people have come among us and drawn a false impression of the Indian world...All this has meant that we kept a lot of things to ourselves and the community doesn’t like us telling its secrets. This applies to all our *customs*”(9, emphasis mine).

Yet Sommer does not account for how, just a few sentences after this defensive litany by Menchú, she inexplicably resumes telling the detailed narratives of her customs...“anyways,” she says, calling attention to the above digression, “when a baby is born...” such and such a thing is done, offering chapter-long details of the meaning of practical minutiae; why red strings are used to tie a newborn’s hands; why male boys have an extra day alone with the mother; why so-and-so must be present, and what that signifies, etc. Menchú, after emphasizing the oath to secrecy that “applies to all our customs” and applies *to her as well*, goes on to explicate in novella-length detail many of her culture’s most important practices. As an alternate explanation, I believe she is being wholly *consistent* with the contextual framework from which she narrates; in other

words, she is simply fulfilling her responsibility to keep ancestral teachings alive: “again, this is all bound up with our commitment to maintain our customs and pass on the secrets of our ancestors... we must *conserve* them” (17), she says. Since the beginning, when a child is born, “[the communal parents] promise to teach the child to keep the secrets of our people, so that our culture and customs will be *preserved*” (12). By ‘preserve’ she means to keep out of view from those capable of taking their culture away: Historically, Spaniards, and now, Ladinos and non-Indian elites. Earlier on, the subject of historical memory arose. The raze-and-burn cultural policy of the Spaniard colonizers left a lasting impression on Mayan historical memory; the lesson learned: no one can steal what cannot be found, or even more, what no one knows to look for. To survive, the Mayans learned to speak by *concealing*:

“My father used to say ‘there are many secrets we must not tell. We must keep our secrets’. He said no rich man, no landowner, no priest or nun, must ever know our secrets. If we don’t protect our ancestor’s secrets, we’ll be responsible for killing them” (188).

The phrase “we’ll be responsible for killing them” could not be more appropriate; for if what it means to be a Mayan Indian is embodied in their cultural practices, their linguistic resources, their costumes, if those resources of expression are taken away an Indian is no longer that; to go back to an earlier statement: “there are Indians who don’t wear Indian clothes and have forgotten their languages, *so they are not considered Indians*” (167). To combat this possibility, “the village leaders come and offer their experience, their example, and their knowledge of our ancestors. They explain how to *preserve* traditions” (12). Growing up, Menchú recalls the lessons of her parents, the insistence that “it is our duty as parents to keep our secrets safe generation after generation, to prevent the *ladinos* learning anything of our ancestors’ ways” (68). It was, after all, the Western Christian civilizing mission that brought on the need for secrets. This is why “we don’t perform only Christian ceremonies. We don’t want to because we know that they are weapons they use to take away what is ours” (171), she explains. The memory of colonialism heeds a powerful warning to all Mayans; “we must not trust them, white men are all thieves. We must keep our secrets from them,” say the Mayan elders (69).

As seen, Sommer’s claim that Menchú’s use of “secrets” is purely “rhetorical” can be contrasted with a different account of her narrative. Throughout several points Menchú openly reveals (though the message falls between the ‘gaps’) what she means, *specifically*, by each ‘secret’: “We have our secrets,” she says, “My mother had many little secrets that she taught us, just small things. For instance, what to do when a lot of dogs are barking or biting someone” (190). Being able to calm a disruptive animal is important practical knowledge in her community given, as Menchú tells it, the regimented and limited sleep patterns of working Mayans; one only has a couple hours to sleep before returning to work in the plantations, so being woken by animals, she tells, would be injurious to their daily routines. She divulges another little secret:

“It was the community who taught me to respect all the things which must remain secret as long as we exist, and which future generations will keep secret...when

we began to organize ourselves, we started by using all the things we'd kept hidden—*our traps*—nobody knew about them because they'd been kept secret (139).

Developing methods of self-defense, organizing the community in a clandestine matter was essential; if the military got wind of the mobilization of highland Mayans in El Quiché, the implications would be life-threatening. That is why “no one must discover our community’s secret...it’s a secret what we are doing here”(125). To escape detection of soldiers, it was the “organization” of the village which “was totally secret,” the “network of information” the village had put into operation (128) became a secret— a way of being ‘discreet’ that ensured their survival. There is no ‘coyness’ in this understanding of secrets, as Sommer suggests. In fact, when Menchú’s village outsmarted several soldiers, she recalls: “I said: ‘This is a great victory for our secrets, no-one has discovered them’” (147).

But the question must be asked again: if one cannot perform ceremonies due to erupting violent conditions, how is Menchú’s culture to survive? How is the knowledge to be passed on without applied practices? The question of whether to reveal ‘secrets’ or not is mimicked in an earlier decision, a pattern being woven under the surface. To recall that painful decision: “we would forget our customs, our ceremonies, for a while, and plan our security first” ...“we broke with many of our cultural procedures by doing this, but we knew it was the only way to save ourselves” (125, 128). Hence the following: “and so we have to protect our lives, we are ready to defend them [our lives, as in our ancestors] *even if it means revealing our secrets.*” (170). In the wake of a breakdown in context, the rules of the game have changed, yet the nexus of relations—the socio-historical context that produced the conditions in which the ‘game’ emerged— does not. Menchú still understands herself *as the self she grew into an understanding of*; as a product of an ancestral community commended with the task of preserving one’s own way of life. Thus, in the midst of (yet another) genocide “we had to prevail over these times through the living memory of our ancestors” (187). And it is through the living memory of her ancestors that Menchú speaks, the way she is most *at home* in speaking, when asked to give her ‘testimony’: “I was asked to give my testimony *about the situation in Guatemala,*” she recounts, and that is exactly what she did. She explained ‘the situation’ by narrating how it is her people’s world was dissolving; how Mayans were being exterminated by more than the current military regime, but also by the structural conditions underpinning it. For the “violence” to end, the latter must be brought out of concealment. This is what it means to denounce the regime and all that supports its very existence.

An interesting claim Sommer makes, however, focuses on another aspect of Menchú’s narrative; the author-editor function played by the ethnologist who interviewed, tape-recorded, and compiled Menchú’s narrative into a ‘text’. Sommer writes:

“we should notice that the audible protests of silence [the secrets] are responses to anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray’s line of questioning. If she were not asking possibly impertinent questions, the Quiché informant would have no reason to resist”.⁶²

And yet I’m not so sure Menchú is resisting. Burgos-Debray would have to

have been asking *nothing but* impertinent questions in order to maintain the level of repetitive, cyclical continuity evidenced in Menchú's verbalization of "secrets." To call up the original frustration Burgos-Debray's expresses in the introduction to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, her narrative subject seemed bent on talking about marriage ceremonies, rituals, and customs rather than sticking to the assigned teleological outline suggested by Burgos-Debray. Yet Menchú's actions here are not to be interpreted as purposeful 'digressions', à la Sommer, intent on derailing the ethnologist's project; Menchú simply has a different conception of a *telos*: for her, projecting into the future means a simultaneous reaching back—a sliding to and fro in order to talk about the present. This is why, to begin, Menchú expresses her desire to begin in (what she recognizes for the European ethnographer to be) an unorthodox manner: "I'd like to start from when I was a little girl, or go back even further to when I was *in my mother's womb*" (1).

For Sommer, the appearance of withholding secrets "surely infuriates some traditional anthropologists. Perhaps they are deaf to the message of propriety, or they feel goaded to know more than she will tell"⁶³ But is *the* message propriety? Because I am not Indian, I cannot say whether the alternative explanation I offer is any closer to what Menchú means to say. Following Nietzsche, I too might be replacing one fiction for another. But I, like Sommer, believe in arriving at our conclusions by taking very careful looks at the stories we study. She is apt to point out members of certain scientific communities will be jarred by the dissonance created in reading Menchú's text; where we differ is in the conclusion—for me, the effect is not one created purposefully *by* Menchú in order to create distance, but rather is the result of *how* the Western interlocutor interprets her discursive attempts *as* distancing. To this end, the "appearance" of 'withholding secrets' does, in fact, exist, but only for *us*. To ask Menchú to answer to this ploy, this ingenious ruse, could also be to say to Menchú that we haven't *heard* her at all, that we've been listening to ourselves instead. In spite of this, Sommer's reading of Menchú's narrative is highly complementary to my own, since it develops possible layers unconcealed by different interpretations, different ways of seeing what ostensibly appears to be the same thing, as in the canonical understanding of a text as a 'fixed' object. In looking at the theme of "secrets" in this manner, we realize that as interpreters we can often come through different avenues, melodies, and ways to share in the same coda; Sommer's concludes her analysis of Menchú's narrative by asserting what I, too, would affirm. In response to reading Menchú, She writes:

"It is a lesson in the distinction between giving support and giving orders. Readers may feel moved to lobby against military aid to a cruel regime, perhaps to send medical supplies or food, and to reflect on the long history of slippages between wanting to know Indians and thinking you know enough to make policy for them."⁶⁴

To give Menchú the last word:

"We Indians have always hidden our identity and kept our secrets to ourselves. This is why we are discriminated against"... "we often find it hard to talk about ourselves because we know we must hide so much in order to preserve our Indian culture and prevent it being taken away from us." [but] "we can select what is truly relevant for our people. Our lives show us what this is. It has guaranteed our existence. Otherwise we

would not have survived... we have selected *what is relevant for us* and have fought for this"...
"we don't do this or that so our neighbors can say, what good people they are! We do it
for our ancestors" (21,170,187, emphasis added).

"We do it for our ancestors," henceforth, becomes the navigational compass for action—the prescriptive orientation coming down from her tradition; it is a view of agency fundamentally rooted in directing one's possible future actions through a synchronized retrieval of pre-existing traditions and cultural relations. Put in other words, for the Mayan subaltern speaker to talk explicitly about the future is to always speak implicitly about *colonialism*, about the narrative that makes possible an understanding of the current violence as inherently not-of-one's making. This is why she speaks about the military violence as derivative of an older situational matrix: "our situation has nothing do with fate but was something which had been imposed on us" (119), she says; "if you think about it, Spain has a lot to do with our situation. They have a lot to do with the origins of the suffering of the people, especially of the Indians" (186). To ask a Mayan Indian to try to be "objective" about the 'actual' situation in Guatemala during the 1970s and 1980s (that is, to try to give an account of history which paints the government and Ladino elites in a other way than as 'oppressor') is to denude Mayans of lived experience, of their sedimented, protestational stance towards official history.

Keep in mind, Menchú believes she is being asked to speak about the plight of her people, about the *suffering of indigenous communities* in Guatemala. Even when her Western interlocutor chooses to hear for palpable narratives of hunger and material strife, Menchú points the way towards an understanding of her narrative that is "aggregative rather than analytic"⁶⁵; in other words, as a privileging of the sum total, of the effect produced by pointing to passages the same way a flame passes candle to candle, gaining luminary value with each new descriptive flicker. In light of the rampart "malnutrition, hunger, poverty" faced by her people, she tells, "we started thinking about the roots of the problem and came to the conclusion that everything stemmed from the ownership of the land"(116). To the economically-deterministic ear, being able to ground the problem faced by indigenous peoples on "ownership of the land," of having control of the means of production, is not misguided, nor without precedent. But the point remains that for Menchú this problem is rooted in an even older condition produced by *coloniality*:

"[the elders] refer back to the time of Columbus and say: 'Our forefathers were dishonored by the White Man—sinners and murders; and it is not the fault of our ancestors...if they hadn't come, we would all be united, equal, and our children would not suffer. *We would not have boundaries to our land*' (67).

If "the White Man" had not arrived, for the Mayans, land ownership would still be understood as communal property, collectivized, and remain un-divided; by having "boundaries" to their land, Menchú is referring to the phenomenon of parceling out measurable plots of land, first by colonial administrators, and subsequently by the Guatemalan government. For this reason, Menchú explains, the most important form of communal education after the teaching of daily customs and practices is a historical

education; being an ‘educated’ Indian has nothing to do with schooling in humanistic knowledge, but with having a sense of *one’s own history*. She narrates:

“I was now an educated woman. Not in the sense of any schooling and even less in the sense of being well-read. *But I knew the history of my people*, and the history of my companeros from other [Mayan] ethnic groups” (169).

This is what it means to ‘have knowledge’, to bring forward a collective, social autobiography written by a long lineage of communal experiences and ways of interpreting those experiences. Since the beginning, she tells, “[newborns] are told that the Spaniards dishonored our ancestors’ finest sons, and the most humble of them. And it is to honor these humble people that we must keep our secrets”(13). In the marriage rites, she makes a point to emphasize the community elders always “say: ‘This is what our ancestors were like; this is what the White Man did; it’s the fault of the White Man...who is to blame for all this? The White Man who came to our country” (69).

As we have seen, being able to grasp (and by ‘grasp’ I mean becoming continually aware of) the contextual, historical framework operative in narratological practices of Mayan Indians is imperative on many levels. First, it neutralizes the positivist-minded social-scientist’s project of trying to establish a ‘more objective’ historical referent for indigenous peoples outside of their own. The very idea of helping indigenous peoples cope with their situation by helping them ‘get clear’ on what are fundamentally Western ways of looking at historical events will not lead to “genuine” pathways for communication, but to exacerbating the sentiment that one is not being heard across the border (s). Secondly, what official colonial constructions of history do is facilitate the maintenance of the colonial condition by *reproducing* the illusion of a neutral, value-free perspective that is always privileged over indigenous, ‘biased’ perspectives. It instills a formal grounding, a sense of predictability-- of the ability to exercise control over flux by falling in line with linear narrative structures (facilitated by subject-predicate grammar). Official colonial history and the language of empirical science work in conjunction to *re-conceal* the Mayan’s lived understanding of the world as a historical breakdown, a collapse, as we have said earlier, of ‘worldhood’.

Specifically, the Stoll-Menchú controversy covers over this world-defining collapse by engaging textual interpretation of Indian “testimonies of survival” based solely on the Western interpreter’s own *criterion for credibility*. In so doing so, the controversy reproduces certain Western cultural conventions rooted in a naturalistic ontology by devaluing indigenous worldviews based on human *practices*. I take the anthropologist Victoria Sanford’s advocacy of reading Menchú’s narrative through a “meaning-centered” interpretive method one step further. She writes:

Survivor testimonies viewed in the context of the discourse and practice of the various phases of state terror...represent a living memory of the terror that continues to influence daily life. Under these circumstances, *discrepancies* encountered in testimonies taken in the field should not be taken to indicate faulty memory, invention, or deception. Rather these *contradictions* should ‘lead us through and beyond facts to their meaning’ as experienced by survivors and witnesses”⁶⁶ (emphasis mine).

On this view, I suggest that the alleged ‘in-itself’ existence of the above-mentioned “discrepancies” in Menchú’s narrative ‘exist’ only on culturally normativistic grounds. That is to say, Sanford’s references to these contradictions and discrepancies exist *only* when testimonies are read from a Western perspective.

For example, in the West, lived experience is filtered through an understanding of self as a relation between subjects and objects commensurate with a *naturalistic* ontology. Presently, and for some time now since the arrival of post-seventeenth century scientific thinking (ushered in by the likes of Newton, Copernicus, and Brahe), we have subscribed to a conception of the world that is purely scientific, one that holds up the structure and content of the world as solely governed by natural law. Historically, the overwhelming successes of modern science in rationally predicting, manipulating, and empirically verifying the existence of the external world through regimented calculability and standardized experimentation have led to a distinctively naturalistic account of human knowledge, one where objective science, not human *practice*, is the measure of all things. Scientific naturalism, in particular, undervalues the foundational role human construction of *standards* underlying our world play in our knowledge of the world, where world is seen as a *historical paradigm*.⁶⁷

Over time, naturalism has become synonymous with a reductivist non-normative account of the world that is purely scientific, one mired in objectivity and philosophically committed to the physical world as fundamentally *knowable*. The social sciences and particularly the *research methods* of modern anthropology and ethnography are prime examples of this positivist bias. Thus, when David Stoll defends his research of uncovering possible lies told by Menchú, he credits his project to the foundational need to “differentiate truth from falsehood” in defense of “the scientific spirit”.⁶⁸

Moreover, this insistence on factual veracity is precisely why phenomenological reading practices pose threats to the totalizing, overarching influence of scientific naturalism in textual interpretation—because phenomenological approaches disclose the authority justifying many of scientific naturalism’s claims as relative; that is to say, they are based on a self-reflexive commitment to a picture of “science” that is paradigmatically *modern* and arose from the “great successes” of post-seventeenth century scientific thought. In other words, naturalism is deeply rooted in certain historical trajectories descendant from the European Enlightenment; it is an atomistic viewpoint which, when grafted onto Mayan worldviews, masters over and conceals the role of human agency in indigenous ontologies. For example, when modern Mayans attempt to speak, what shows up to the Western listener, then, are “inconsistencies” and “contradictions” which are reclassified as “falsehoods,” “lies”. Saying “Rigoberta lied” is also to say we don’t understand what she is saying as something worth valuing, that is, we don’t recognize the Morse code she is sending us because it is not encoded through our language of empiricism, and is subsequently discarded. Thus, despite offering insightful alternatives as to how ‘discrepancies’ and ‘contradictions’ in survivor testimonies could be interpreted differently, Sanford still holds on to the assumption that

the contradictions do, in fact, exist in themselves, rather than challenging them structurally by examining how such ‘discrepancies’ exist *for us*.⁶⁹

Thus, it is important, if not crucial, to begin to rethink the accepted “discrepancies” and “contradictions” perceived to be in Menchú’s narrative as products of Western cultural normative practices. Finally, let us now turn to the controversy itself, fleshing out its parameters so as to move *past* them; this, in an effort to hear Menchú *on her own terms*— a task which is always unfinished, on-the-way, and towards which we must continually reach. There is no ‘getting it right’ with regards to interpreting Menchú’s narrative because reading practices are invariably framed through the reader’s own particular conceptual framework. However, when seen as an *event*, by taking the stance of *repetition* (that is, continuously reengaging the act of trying to hear anew) we may create through our practices certain conditions favorable to equitable discourse between culturally different agents.

CHAPTER THREE

BEARING TRUTHFUL WITNESS: DAVID STOLL AND THE STORY OF ALL POOR GUATEMALANS

After receiving a “tip” from an American anthropologist claiming to be in possession of corroborative evidence for his allegations (i.e., the academic book he had just written), on December 15th, 1998, the prestigious *New York Times* ran a front-page article headlined by “Nobel Winner Finds Her Story Challenged” in reference to Rigoberta Menchú. The controversy was this: the American anthropologist in question seemed to have found evidence of contradictions in Menchú’s testimony, thereby suggesting it should be impeached based on her now-tarnished credibility. The article, written by one of the paper’s top Central American correspondents, Larry Rohter, was quickly picked up by the international press and reprinted the next morning as “Tarnished Laureate.”⁷⁰ Rohter writes:

“Key details of [Menchú’s] story... are untrue, according to a new book written by an American anthropologist, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Based on nearly a decade of interviews with more than 120 people and archival research, the anthropologist, David Stoll, concludes that Ms. Menchú’s book “cannot be the eyewitness account it purports to be” because the Nobel laureate repeatedly describes “experiences she never had herself”⁷¹.

Having framed the polemic on the reliability of first person eye-witness testimony to report only what one has borne witness to (versus hearsay), Rohter’s article went on to reproduce Stoll’s major assertions, all of which center on a direct contestation of Menchú’s “version of the facts.” According to Stoll, Menchú (whom he only refers to as Rigoberta) misrepresents the “situation of her family and village life before the war”⁷² in an effort to fall in line with the revolutionary ideology of the EGP, a militant peasant organization.

Based on interviews and archival field work, Stoll claims the following: (1) Menchú’s brother Nicolas did not die of intoxication from pesticide fumes, as she claims in her narrative, but of simple malnutrition; (2) the land dispute Menchú alludes to was not between “evil” Ladino elite landowners but a paltry quarrel over land between her father, Vicente, and another Mayan neighbor; (3) Menchú’s Father, who died during the occupation of the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala, served as the instigator for the skirmish between the peasants and the army, immolated himself, and may even have been personally responsible for the fire; (4) Menchú lied about being an illiterate peasant who could not write or speak Spanish; based on conversations with Belgian nuns in the region who remember Menchú, Stoll claims Menchú attended a prestigious boarding school on

an academic scholarship, knew Spanish, how to write, and did not engage in manual labor in the *fincas* given her full-time enrollment in school. The nuns do not have records to prove this, but he believes them; (5) Stoll claims her brother, Petrochino, was not burned alive by the military, as she depicts in her narrative, but rather *shot* by the military and dumped in a common mass grave.⁷³ For Stoll, these are all inconsistencies that *matter* because he claims they reveal a deeper revolutionary “agenda” to cover over “what cannot be corroborated” in order to put forth propagandist versions of the facts as the one “official story”. In response to the allegations of filtering ‘the truth’ to fit an ideological “agenda”, Menchú countered in a January 1999 interview in *La Prensa Libre*:

“There is no hidden agenda. Some people think that I have a hidden agenda, a hidden truth, and that therefore they must bring out that truth. Today I can tell you all these things because nobody will be assassinated tomorrow because of it.”⁷⁴

Stoll’s overarching argument in *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* discredits Menchú’s detailed descriptions of the state-sponsored terror in Guatemala as historically “inaccurate”. He contends “Rigoberta’s version was so attractive to so many foreigners that Mayans who repudiated the guerillas were often ignored or discounted”⁷⁵. Stoll includes *himself* in the people “ignored or discounted” in the wake of worldwide attention focused on Menchú’s narrative. For instance, Stoll’s ‘expert’ assessment—which he had articulated years earlier in his Stanford doctoral dissertation but according to him went “unnoticed” in the “politically correct” academic world owing to the “fashionable popularity” of Menchú’s book— points blame for the violence at guerilla insurgents. Had the guerillas, many of whom were Mayans themselves, not instigated violence against the armed forces, Stoll suggests, perhaps Mayans would not have faced the same level of repression from the military. In other words, since hypothetically speaking Mayan insurgents could have acted differently, perhaps rebelling against the *Guerillas* who were fueling the violence (in his view), the massacres of Mayans could have been avoided. In fact, the massacres of Mayan Indians were a result, in his expert opinion, of a ‘crossfire’ between radicalized insurgents lulled by the romanticism of ‘Guevarismo’ and a predictable ‘anti-terrorist’ response by the state.

Not surprisingly, Stoll’s controversial conclusion “brutality toward civilians is a predictable result”⁷⁶ from insurrectional activity taken against a repressive government did not make it into the New York Times article, for it places blame on victims of violence for rebelling against their oppressors. Stoll discredits the assertion made by Menchú, as well as by prominent historians of Central America, that guerilla groups formed *in response* to state repression. Although Menchú’s side of the story is echoed by United Nations reports, citing the army for “over 95 percent of the killings,”⁷⁷ Stoll contends revolutionary groups like the EGP (Ejército Guerrillero do los Pobres) [Guerilla Army of the Poor] played a *foundational* role in the violence. The ‘controversy,’ hence, is between contrasting versions of the same events; one from the victim (Menchú) who lived through the ‘terror’ and holds the military to blame, versus that of the professional academic (Stoll) who considers himself a neutral “scientist,” and points the finger in the other direction, towards tensions caused by insurgencies from rebel forces, such as the predominantly indigenous EGP.

In interviews following the publication of Rohter's article, Stoll reiterated his position that Menchú's narrative became canonized in the 1980s by well-meaning leftist intellectuals as part of a "concerted effort to construct an international human rights imaginary" – in reference to the work of John Beverley, whom Stoll cites as "an expert in *testimonio*"—that is "sacred" and beyond question"⁷⁸. He says, "I wanted to encourage more survivors to share their experiences of violence"⁷⁹ without mentioning why in his book he *only* offers accounts of the violence which, after being selectively compiled, bolster *his own* argument, discounting any which might corroborate Menchú's account.

In a February 1999 interview with Dina Garcia, Stoll adds, "when a book becomes almost sacred, it is a sign that it hides contradictions that ought to see the light of day."⁸⁰ What Stoll meant by a book becoming "almost sacred" is this: by the time Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 for "her tireless defense of indigenous rights and peoples," her 1983 narrative denouncing the violence in Guatemala had already been translated into half a dozen languages, placed on the multicultural reading lists of many university syllabi, and become an international best-seller. And, although the Nobel Prize committee responded to Rohter's article by reminding the international audience that the prize awarded was "for *peace*, not literature," many critics claimed her "autobiography's" prominence "paved the way for her being awarded the Nobel Prize"⁸¹. In spite of this, in the introduction to his book, Stoll makes the rhetorical assertion that if the Nobel Prize resulted (whether directly or indirectly) from the international success Menchú's narrative had achieved, what would happen, then, "if much of Rigoberta's story is not true?"⁸²

Throughout Latin America, and especially in Guatemala, a bevy of editorial rejoinders to the Rohter article appeared in newspapers and journals in the days following the *New York Times* article publication. In a January 16, 1999 *La Jornada* editorial ironically titled "Let's Shoot Rigoberta," Eduardo Galeano makes the following remark:

"[Stoll] came to Guatemala to study us as if we were insects...In his book he invokes witnesses and archives. What archives can there possibly be about the recently concluded war? Did the Guatemalan army open their archives to him? Not too long ago, Congressman Barrios Kleé tried to consult those same archives, and he was later found with a bullet hole in his head."⁸³

For many close to the situation in Guatemala, one columnist noted,

"the prominence of [Rohter's] article came as a surprise, because the [New York Times] had downplayed other significant events that took place in Central America during 1998, including the assassination in Guatemala of Bishop Juan Gerardi, the head of the Recovery of Historical Memory commission (REMHI), forty-eight hours after he presented the printed version of the commission's human rights document, *Guatemala, Never Again*"⁸⁴.

Commissioned by the United Nations, the allusion in Bishop Gerardi's report to the Jewish holocaust sought to emphasize the worldwide apathetic diffidence towards the history of a whole people—the Mayan Indians, during the genocidal period in Guatemala.

The timely reference suggests an ethical quandary over narrative authority. If it is the case that witnesses of crimes cannot denounce violence firsthand because their voices have been snuffed out along with their lives, how is a story, one with life-and-death consequences, to be told? How can official history record the voices of the voiceless when they are no longer alive to represent themselves? Journalists and forensic anthropologists may be of valuable aid in reconstructing historical tragedies, particularly in cases where intensive field work leads to the unearthing of clandestine cemeteries, as in Victoria Sanford's work. Yet if influential journalists encapsulate cultural tragedies by reducing them to allusionial bi-lines, victims will be hard pressed to accept any official version as an adequate account of their lived experience. For example, by omitting specific details or even official casualty figures by the United Nations—200,000 dead, 40,000 'disappeared,' 100,000 orphans, and a million and a half refugees--and simply calling it a "civil war," Rohter summarized the force of Stoll's accusations by noting, "it is necessary for readers 'to distinguish between what can be corroborated and what cannot, what is probable and what is highly improbable'." ⁸⁵

For Menchú, what stood out as improbable would be the inability of the international press to corroborate facts from a dead person; in explaining why she gave a first person account of her brother Petrocinio's death despite not bearing direct witness to it, she confides "my mother saw it. And she can no longer speak about it." Since her mother suffered the same fate as so many Mayan Indians, Menchú asks: "How could I possibly have presented my mother as the number one witness, when they have killed so many witnesses so they can't speak?"⁸⁶ Dante Liano has responded to the charges brought against Menchú by pointing out that

"what we have here is a classic campaign to rewrite history [by Stoll]"... "it calls to mind the technique used to attack the veracity of the Holocaust survivors: "but you just said you were in that camp, whereas the documents prove you were in another camp; and if that concentration camp did not exist, perhaps no concentration camps ever existed at all".⁸⁷

And yet Stoll holds steady in his book to warnings against reliance in different "perspectives" in first-person testimonial narratives without an "objective mediator" to test for "accuracy"; if, as academics, we remain steadfast to the idea of critical inquiry, then we must see to it that Menchú, "a quasi-religious figure," is "compared to other forms of evidence"⁸⁸. For some critics, including renowned anthropologists, this stressing of neutrality does not sit well in a field keenly aware that documents or "facts" never speak for themselves, but always need interpreting. What seems to be really at stake, then, is a debate internal to disciplinary frameworks split between a polarization of postmodernist pedagogy inclusive of difference versus scientific naturalism's will towards a single neutral Truth. Carol Smith writes:

"Objective reportage, according to Stoll, is no longer appreciated in the social sciences, heavily influenced by literary theory, postmodernity, and general postcolonial or multicultural uncertainty about the trustworthiness of white first-world men. Witnesses who represent the subaltern—people like Rigoberta—are better sources on the oppressed and on the meaning of their lives than are outside reporters. This has given

Rigoberta an “unfair” advantage over Stoll—the objective reporter, just trying to get at the “truth”.⁸⁹

Anticipating the possible polemic over interpretive power, Stoll argues in his own favor in his 1996 article, “To whom should we listen?”.⁹⁰ According to Stoll, because the detached, anthropological perspective can help “sort out” prejudicial, biased accounts in field interviews from more reliable ones, he believes it is essential for native informants to engage field experts truthfully in order for the informant’s community to have the best chance of understanding the actual, historical nature of their situation. However, Stoll, who oddly considers himself a leftward leaning academic, does not blame informants who cannot (perhaps due to trauma, pressure from outside forces, faulty memory, or even duress) recount their lived experiences in a truthful manner. Since for Stoll it is only “natural” for victims of intense violence to lapse into “mythopoetic” accounts of lived experience, rearranging historical facts along ideologies more sympathetic to “narratives of victimization,” it becomes doubly important to employ the resources of a detached interpreter such as himself to help clarify and record official history. This line of reasoning leads John Beverley to ask whether it is possible “to have a ‘left’ politics with a ‘right’ epistemology,” as he views Stoll’s case to be.⁹¹ The literary critic Elizbieta Sklodowska responds with an even more poignant observation; Stoll’s arguments evoke such strong opposition from contemporaries because they are at heart anachronistic, products of an anti-communist, bipolar Cold-War framework that is “oddly out of place”⁹² in the late nineties.

For our part it will not be necessary to develop a defense of Menchú’s account based on evidentiary corroboration of historical documents, as Stoll would perhaps insist on, for this has been extensively undertaken by field experts in both history and forensic anthropology. For example, since 1994, Victoria Sanford, a Peace Fellow at the Bunting Institute and a forensic anthropologist, has headed the exhumations of clandestine cemeteries in rural Mayan villages in Guatemala, serving as a research consultant to the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation for their final report on Mayan casualty tolls. In “Deconstructing David Stoll’s History of Guatemala,” Sanford offers point by point documentation, CIA briefs and memorandums, and empirical field evidence attesting to the Guatemalan military as the culprit of the violence. She also develops another factor for the war Stoll leaves largely unmentioned: US involvement and responsibility. Sanford, utilizing Allan Nairn’s research, points to memorandums from the United States embassy in Guatemala to the Secretary of State, telegrams, and briefings as early as the 1962. She writes:

These documents offer factual and evidentiary corroboration of the context of the terror provided by the testimonies. A declassified CIA document from late February 1982 states that in mid-February 1982 the Guatemalan army had reinforced its existing forces and launched “a sweep operation of the Ixil Triangle. The commanding officers of the units involved *have been instructed to destroy* all towns and villages which are cooperating with the Guerilla Army of the Poor (EGP) and eliminate all sources of resistance”⁹³

On this point, Stoll's deemphasizing of American involvement in the war struck many journalists and historians as also questionable, given his persistence on approaching the 'facts' of what "actually happened". Journalist Margarita Carrera redirects attention to human rights reports which confirm

"how the Guatemalan government was at the service of capitalist interests and defended by the army (which received its orders from the Pentagon) and committed crimes against humanity impossible to either forgive or forget"⁹⁴.

But Carrera's most consequential insight is not her disavowal of foreign intervention in domestic politics, but rather the formulation of the question: "Why does the North American press give so much space to the findings made by this book?"⁹⁵

A helpful reply to Carrera's inquiry involves turning away from political semantics and directing our gaze towards the people and culture behind it. As a narrative illustrative of an indigenous, worldly mode of being, Menchú's narrative is steeped in ways of understanding lived experience that are culturally different from Western ones. In order to study different cultures, then, we must study ourselves. To use Spivak's phraseology, 'in other *worlds*,' "an investigator has to understand that logic"⁹⁶ if he is to understand the culture.⁹⁷ With this in mind, let us now turn to Menchú's narrative again, by paying close attention to how Menchú relates to herself, as evidenced in the things she says and how she says them. Moreover, we must try to get better acquainted with the narrative logic she uses in an attempt to bring that logic out of concealment. Likewise, by retuning our ear for slightly newer and different frequencies we may begin to circumvent and bypass Stoll's arguments.

The central argument Stoll levies against Menchú in an effort to impeach her testimony, keep in mind, is the alleged collectivization of the first person voice—the "I" that speaks for "all"—as evidenced in the opening lines of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*: "My name is Rigoberta Menchú...my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans."⁹⁸ This is because, for Stoll, "the story of one person *cannot* be the story of everyone...unless in a non-literal sense."⁹⁹ For Menchú, however, the construction of subjectivity—how she understands and deploys the first-person pronoun, "I"—is rooted in a communal versus an individualistic understanding of the self. She writes:

"I can't force them to understand. Everything, for me, that was the story of my community is also my own story. I did not come from the air, I am not a little bird who came alone from the mountains, from parents who were isolated from the world. I am the product of a community."¹⁰⁰

As evidenced throughout her narrative, Menchú's understands herself to be the elected representative and "voice" for her community. When this self-understanding is compounded with a sense of urgency and instinct towards survival, generalizations such as speaking for "all poor Guatemalans" occur. It is a dynamic often cited amongst Holocaust survivors who assert the 'victims' of genocide can no longer speak for themselves because, to be frank, they are dead. Moreover, Menchú carefully emphasizes at several points in her narrative that she does *not* speak for everyone, but such instances

are omitted from Stoll's book in favor of the single quote "my story is the story of all poor Guatemalans," which became the hook and title for his book.

Part of my personal frustration in reading *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in light of the controversy sparked by Stoll has to do with how Stoll's respondents—a small army of renowned North American scholars and New Left intelligentsia—pounced on Stoll's accusations by conceding to his main assertions—that it appears as if yes, in fact, Menchú actually 'misconstrued' or 'dramatized' many events— but exculpated Menchú from any 'blame' by offering *alternate disciplinary and interpretive frameworks* to explain the *uncontested, 'in-itself' existence* of these discrepancies and contradictions. To be sure, in the course of analyzing Menchú's narrative, I am also wrapped up in a particular interpretive framework, whether we choose to call it phenomenological, postcolonial discourse analysis, or so forth, but the difference lies in that I maintain an altogether different conclusion about the reasons why Menchú's narrative, as it is commonly cited, "failed". In the wake of Stoll's claims, the dominant explanatory positions—such as pointing to the intervention of the 'editor-compiler' in any mediated narrative (Skłodowska); the inadequacies of earlier definitions of *testimonio* (Beverley and Zimmerman); the privileging of certain kinds of models of 'Truth' in traditional Journalism versus new journalism (Poniatowska); or as the result of intentional rhetorical devices aimed at keeping a safe distance from foreigners — all pointed *away* from the text, albeit each for wildly different yet expertly-argued reasons. These critiques are not at all without relevance; in fact, *all* of these interpretations are immensely helpful in thinking about testimonial practice and, by relation, about how different societies construct cultural-ideological apparatuses through contestational networks of power relations.

However, in my view, to respond to Stoll's allegations, the 'explanation,' if we may call it that, was *always already present* throughout her narrative; only it was nested, peppered rather than overtly bolded in ways hasty readers would not see as 'evident'. From this stance, we can make the following counter-arguments regarding Stoll's accusations: First, impeaching Menchú's eye-witness descriptions of the death of her brothers, which Stoll alleges she never bore "direct" witness too lies in a misunderstanding (a mis-listening) of what Menchú means—and more importantly, *says she means*—by "brother", which itself is predicated on Stoll's pre-reflective assumption that the Western notion of subjectivity and 'personal identity' is universal and uncontested. Furthermore, Menchú's authority to talk about the death of other Indians is *pre-given* in her culture; in fact, due to the explanation of the role her parents play in the ancestral framework, it is almost her *responsibility* to speak for others, as will be shown.

Also, the murder of an Indian is experienced significantly different by the Mayans than the way the concept of murder is understood in the West: "as for killing someone: death *lived by others*," (202) the untimely death of any Mayan, she says, is always experienced by *other* people because death can only be "one's own" if one has been given a chance to own up to 'death' during the traditional Death ceremony. It is *only* at that time an Indian can speak 'as himself' and make recommendations to the whole community. The murder of an Indian is thus carried forward by a community as if it were

one's own murder, calling it up again and again in denunciations of the murderers since the murdered Indian was never able to speak as (what in the West is understood as) one's *self*.

Stoll's claim that testimonies based on hearsay— that is, testimony based on what *other* people saw, said, or experienced— violates the aforementioned conditions for credibility of a witness (such as describing *only* experiences one had oneself) entirely misses what Menchú is trying to say about the nature of 'giving testimony'—namely, that it is the product of a communal interpretation versus an individual's. Specifically, (and this is perhaps the most noteworthy reversal of Stoll's reading of Menchú's narrative) if we read closely, we can see that hearsay turns out to be *a privileged form of knowledge for Quiche Mayan Indians*.

Every one of Stoll's allegations, such as his contentions that Menchú failed to mention her schooling, her ability to read, write, and speak Spanish, or even the civic nature of the land dispute between her father and a neighbor is unfounded as a "revelation" or "discovery" since Menchú talks about every one of Stoll's allegations in her narrative, offering explanations which have fallen on deaf ears. Had a more attuned reading of the narrative taken place, perhaps Stoll would have abandoned his project, since it is difficult to "discover" for the first time, calling it groundbreaking news, what one *has already said*, hence eliminating the possibility of 'withholding facts'. Let us examine.

Menchú succinctly summarizes the Mayan worldview on identity in the last pages of the book: "my life does not belong to me" (246), she says. But what, precisely, does one mean by that? Menchú goes to great lengths to give a descriptive account of her answer:

"the birth of a new member is very significant for the community, as it belongs to the community not just to the parents, and that's why three couples must be there to receive it...the child is the fruit of communal love" (8).

"from the very first day," tells Menchú, "the baby belongs to the community, not only to the parents" (15) and for this reason "our customs do not allow single women to see a birth...it's a scandal if an Indian woman goes to a hospital and gives birth there" (8). This is because all the communal representatives are not allowed to be present to receive the child in a hospital birth-room, thus violating their ceremonial customs. Any child born to members of the community thus becomes the "brother" or "sister" of other members of the community: "they were Indians, our brothers" (180), Menchú insists. When traveling through other communities which, as Menchú observed, shared habitual practices with the Indians back home (such as sleeping on mats or eating *tortilla* with *chile* for breakfast), "it was as if I were living with my brothers and sisters" (163), she says. Because her 'biological' family, as we understand the category of family to mean, was clearly not the only family to subscribe to those daily habits, what Menchú signifies by "brother and sisters" are her *communal* brothers and sisters. "When, on May 29th, 1978, the army massacred 106 peasants in the nearby village of Panzós, a community made up of Kekchi Indians that shared almost identical daily practices, says Menchú, "we felt

this was a direct attack on us. It was as if they'd murdered us, as if we were being tortured when they killed those people" (160). "I loved all my people, and for me they're all brothers and sisters whoever they are" (243), she repeats. But to recall, her people are foremost Mayans-- those who share the same habitual practices and customs.

This pre-woven understanding of 'siblings,' in part, explains why Menchú seems to find it difficult to give an actual count, to the best of her abilities, how many "blood" brothers and sisters she had: "My mother already had five children, *I think*. Yes, I had five brothers and sisters and I'm the sixth" (5, emphasis mine). Yet elsewhere she describes the count differently: "I'm the sixth in the family, with three brothers *after me*" (48). The task here is not to cover up any *tensions*, which, as hybrid identities battling with the legacy of colonialism within themselves, Mayan identities may have, but rather to listen to accounts of life that are openly struggling with those very tensions, trying to place emphasis on how the world shows up for them in light of those tensions. For example, Menchú gives an account of Indian identity which might mitigate the appearance of these tensions. Stoll, on the other hand, *clasps on* to these surface-level appearances of tensions in order for him to base his claim that Menchú is lying.¹⁰¹ He does not take into consideration Menchú's claim that for the Mayans, "a child is not born into a 'family' but rather "he *very slowly* becomes a member of it" (10). This usually happens between by the age of 12; that is when a child is reintroduced into the community as a member of a particular 'family', but remains a brother or sister to all.

To complicate matters, one's "identity" is not assumed to come with birth; Mayans *grow into* it and moreover possess a *doubled* sense of self. This other 'self' is the *nahual*: "the nahual is our double" (6), Menchú explains. "Younger children don't know the nahual of their elder brothers and sisters" she later expands; "they are only told all this when they are mature enough and this could be at any age between ten and twelve" (20). Knowing the 'identity' of one's 'biological' brothers and sisters (which is always tertiary to the communal self and the nahuatl self), then, is something one must be 'told', because it is not pre-supposed in the culture. Consider, then, Menchú's description of which brother died of malnutrition: "his name was Nicolás. He died when I was *eight*. He was the youngest of all of us, the one my mother used to carry about. He was *two* then" (38). Consequently, Menchú is trying to convey that she *did not yet know her brother's identity according to Mayan understandings of 'self'*. Still, her situation of enunciation necessitated that she use whatever metric of expressibility she needed to use to relate her message and impress upon her interlocutor the *urgency* of her people's situation— trying to explain things, for instance, in ways she thought the European ear would understand— if along the way things were lost in translation, it should not be occasion for impeaching the testimony of an indigenous plaintiff, not just an 'informant'.

On this point of giving testimony, Stoll makes much ado about Menchú's account not being 'faithful of the genre it purports to be an example of'—testimonio—because it is not based on a first-person eye witness account. Yet the construction of 'testimony' Stoll is deploying is not of Menchú's making: for her, 'testimony' is a *lived* phenomenon: "my mother used to say that through her life, through her *living* testimony" (199)...a

'testimony' as the Mayans understand it, is therefore the *totality* of a life; not the recounting of a single temporal event, a dot in a teleological timeline— no, testimony is foremost *embodied*. Thus, for her murdered brothers and sisters, "we have to keep this grief as a testimony to them" (ibid); it is something felt very personally.

Yet on a more significant point, Mayans use hearsay to legitimize knowledge claims because through hearsay one invokes the memory of ancestors by calling them into the present: "if an elderly person tells us this, then it must be true" (123). Growing up, Menchú's father "didn't talk about himself, he'd say: 'This is what my father did.' And they knew the whole of our grandparents' lives like a film" (188). During the marriage rites, "the grandmother tries to give her granddaughter a general idea of what she feels about what is happening in the world...they apply past experience to the present" (76) through talking about their own parents. In turn:

"[my mother] taught me by talking about the experiences of her grandmother...she didn't pass on her own experiences, not that she hadn't had them, *but because she felt more comfortable teaching me through the experiences of others* (210)".

"But , as I said," Menchú reiterates , "she usually told me about my grandparents; not about herself" (211). Hence, when Menchú tries to narrate events she did not witness directly, she begins by saying: "I'm remembering something I saw, now that I'm remembering things *about other people's lives*" (150)... "I remember my mother's life" (88). Without question, the most reproduced of Stoll's indictments against Menchú's testimony is "uncovering" allegations she was not present at the alleged public burning of her eldest brother, Petrochino, because public burnings never occurred in the region Menchú alleges the burning took place. The principal reason Stoll's critics have not defended Menchú on this specific claim other than by saying she had her own 'reasons' for misrepresenting her brother's death, derives from the excruciatingly explicit account of the narration:

"[the soldiers] lined up the tortured and poured petrol on them; and then the soldiers set fire to each one of them. Many of them begged for mercy. Some of them screamed, many of them leapt but uttered no sound—of course, that was because their breathing was cut off..." (178).

Upon the publication of Rohter's article, Menchú admitted she was not there personally, but *her mother was*. Because Menchú carries on her mother's life as a film, a long hieroglyphic reel she must pass on to her own daughter one day, the "revelation" of her mother being the first-person eye witness is no revelation at all—it was always implicit in her narrative:

"I wasn't there at the time; I was in Huehuetenango when my brother was captured" (173); "*My mother said*: 'My son will be among those who are punished' It was going to be done in public, that is, they were calling the people out to witness the punishment...*So my mother said*: 'Come along then, if they're calling out everyone, we'll have to go' (175)..."*My mother was just about 100 percent certain her son would be amongst those being brought in*" (176). "*My mother went closer to the lorry to see if*

she could recognize her son;” “*my mother* recognized her son, my little brother, among them” (176). Menchú continues: “If I remember alright...” from what her mother told her (177)... “*My mother* was weeping, she was looking at her son(178);” “*my mother said* he scarcely recognized us. Or perhaps...*My mother said* he did, that he could still smile at her, but I, well, *I didn’t see that*”. (179). “*My mother* was half dead with grief. *She* embraced her son, *she* spoke to him...Then *my mother said*, ‘I can’t stay here’ So we had to go, to leave it all behind and leave off looking” (180).“*My mother*...She couldn’t bear it, *she remembered* the whole thing. *She* cried from moment to moment, *remembering* (181). The tension Menchú is faced with lies in trying to telling her story about communal experiences to an ear she already knows will hear for different things—for an “I” that is narrating— hence, in trying to resolve the tension by placing herself at the scene of the crime, Menchú tries to segue back into the familiar way of talking about lived experience, as in repeating what elders have said beforehand: “*My mother told me* that one of my brothers died of intoxication” (88), she divulges.

Knowing the emphasis Western ways of thinking place on first-person narrations of events, If Menchú were to simply have asked her interlocutor, “why did they spray poison when people were working there?” (89) without illustrating that Indians have died as a result of the practice, perhaps Menchú worried her concerns (which are also her people’s concerns) would have not been heard, again. She says: “her name was Maria. She was my friend” (87) ; “one day she died of poisoning when they were spraying cotton” (87). “That friend of mine had left me with many things to think about” (88). But can the death of her one friend carry the weight it needed to call our attention to the practice? Menchú reminds us of the following:

“you know, it wasn’t just my brother’s life. It was many lives, and you don’t think that the grief is just for yourself but for all the relatives of the others; God knows if they found relatives of theirs there or not! *Anyway, they were Indians, our brothers*” (180)

And again:

“It angered me too not to have my older brothers with us, not to know them, because they’d died of hunger, of malnutrition, of not having enough to eat in the *finca*” (ibid).

Regardless of *which* one of her many Indian brothers died, or of the *way* they died, the point is, at the close of day, “they didn’t die because *they wanted to*” (118). At other moments, Menchú discloses how she, herself, speaks through hearsay or about a specific event in a manner *other* than the expected one: “of course,” in confiding with an Indian maid in the capital about her problems back home, she says, “I didn’t tell her about my situation or any of my problems; *I told it in a different way*, talking about my experiences in the finca. I found this a *relief*, there were less things on top of me” (239).

For Menchú, the “truth” of an event can only be constructed when another member of her community, especially an elder, says an event happened in a certain way. Knowing the ‘truth’ of the community, she says, “is the main purpose of the elected leader—to embody all the values handed down from our ancestors. He is the *hearer of*

the community, a father to all our children, and he must lead an exemplary life. Above all, he has a commitment to the whole community” (17); “the leaders then pledge the support of the community and say...we will be the child’s second parents...they are known as *abuelos*,...or ‘forefathers’ (7). Menchú’s right to speak for other people in her community, she explains in her narrative, hence derives from the crucial fact “*my father was our community’s elected leader, and so was my mother*” (187). She continues:

“in our village, my father and mother were the representatives. Well, then the whole community *becomes the children of the woman who’s elected*. So, a mother, on her first day of pregnancy, goes with her husband to tell these elected leaders that she’s going to have a child, because the child will not only belong to them but to the whole community” (7)

Menchú frequently reminds her interlocutor that “our people looked on my father as their own father” (106) and so “I felt responsible for many things ” (49); “I began taking over my mother’s role too. My mother was the woman who coordinated certain things in the community” (79). As a result of the role her mother and father played in the community, she explains, “my community always loved me very much, right from when I was very little. They’d tell me all their sorrows and their joys, because my family had been there for a very long time” (87). Because *both* her mother and father have been murdered, Menchú invariably inherits the task of her parents to carry on the memory of their ancestors, not just as any member of the community, but as the one traditionally in charge *for hearing and speaking for the community*. In the Mayan world, she is now her people’s *representative* and she directs her actions accordingly: “everything we’d do, we’d do it thinking of others: would they like this? Or wouldn’t they like that?”.

Menchú could not have been more persistent in trying to communicate to us that her ways are different from ours, she says over and over again, “I’d like to say here, that I wasn’t the only important one...the whole community was important” (117). The “eye” of the eye-witness, for Mayans, is at all times the “eye” of the *community*: “we know that not just one pair of eyes is watching us, but the eyes of the whole community are on us” (49). And so the problem of incommensurability does not seem to lie with the *projection* of the subaltern message, of their attempts to speak up and communicate, but in the *reception* of the communication. Underpinning the space for the possibility of dialogue, then, there exist the particular conceptual orthodoxies derivative of one’s own culture. Stoll, for example, is swathed under an Enlightenment model of the self, echoed in the Cartesian dictum “I think therefore I am,” where one can presumably access universal structures of existence by turning *inwards*, into mental categories and states. However, in the absence of such model, experience can be understood the way the Mayans seem to be articulating: as a fundamentally non-reductive, non-mentalistic continuum of practices, of everyday, lived agency. Yet to our detriment, awareness of this difference cannot be easily cultivated cross-culturally owing to the peripheral status subaltern subjects have been relegated to in official history; theirs is a faint, small voice, one that echoes deeply as it trembles.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Small Voice of History: Subalternity and the Latin American Testimonial Narrative

“I do not know whether this text belongs, purely and properly and strictly and rigorously speaking, to the space of literature, whether it is a fiction or a testimony, and above all, to what extent it calls these distinctions into question or causes them to tremble.”

-- Jacques Derrida,
Demeure: Fiction and Testimony, 26

In order to unveil current neocolonialist strategies aimed at reterritorializing colonial discourse analysis from the mouths of the multitude, the historically voiceless (by delegitimizing their access), it is helpful to view the Latin American testimonial narrative's attempts to decolonize *the resources of expression* from the standpoint of history (as that which determines the conditions for the possibility of expression). In this manner, by disclosing the historically situated epistemic orthodoxies underpinning the enunciative acts of both the *testimonialista* and her academic interlocutors in the branches of ethnography, anthropology, literature and politics, it might be possible to point to conditions which facilitate the emergence of neocolonialist contestations for power, and examine how this power is meted out through normative systems of representation.

Furthermore, one may be led to ask, following Nietzsche, what such tendencies signify when viewed “as a symptom of life”; do they calcify or betray our methodologies of resistance, justifying the means or perhaps revealing the limitations of any discourse based on a fundamentally foreign metric of expressibility...this remains a tangential (so as not to disempower liberational projects based on limited methodologies) question of subaltern cultural production.

Principally, it is the *historical dimension* of discursive practices—that is, the normative ethos within which discursive practices are at all times situated—that provides the backdrop against which a culture's resources of expression may be understood and contextualized. For example, in the West, imparting narrative continuity to one's life is of relative ease given the precedence of the European Enlightenment; from it, a certain model of the human subject as a contemplative, isolated consciousness materializes, one that supports the interpretation of lived experience as a progressive *telos* commensurate with a linear timescape. Continuity becomes possible through the epistemic structures

underpinning culture; narrative forms that accommodate these conventions, such as autobiography and the *bildungsroman* (a novelistic account of one's own subjective development, especially childhood), in turn, became centerpieces in the Western literary canon. Consequently, since and in many ways owing to the Enlightenment, formalist reading practices were calcified according to an occidental conception of subjectivity that begins with the notion of a disengaged subject trying to arrive at objective truths through mentalistic reflexivity.

Conversely, in Latin America (as well as in the colonized, or so-called maldeveloped, 'third' world) the historical dimensions of discursive practices involve not just the effects of mentalistic, positivist epistemology but more markedly the lived *consequences* of a forced *imposition* of such standards.

The Latin American critic, John Beverley, in particular, has attempted to demythologize the historical dimension of autobiography in order to question the efficacy of the form to describe the experiences of the marginalized, that is, experiences alien to representation in official history:

“[the] convention of the autobiographical form...is an ideology built on the notion of a coherent, self-evident, self-conscious, commanding subject who appropriates literature precisely as a means of 'self-expression' and who in turn constructs textually for the reader the liberal imaginary of a unique, 'free', autonomous ego as the natural form of being and public achievement”.¹⁰²

In other words, from the standpoint of modernity, it *makes sense* to talk about one's life in the first person and with sequential organization because the autobiographical form rests on humanist notions already familiar to our understanding of being. They are already familiar because the history of the West—the grand voice of History—is also the history of the victors in colonial contestations of power and as such has become *ubiquitous*. In the case of Western conceptual orthodoxies that deploy binary oppositions (which make systems of *exclusion* possible), the multifarious, pre-colonial channels of verbalization have been expunged from official history; orality, folktale, rumor and proverbial knowledge are covered over as possible means of expression.

But to recover what no longer exists, particularly with regard to Amerindian languages, is not a viable possibility. What does remain a possibility, and an important one at that, is the ability to diagnose the malady which has continued to malnourish our perception of our selves, specifically through the apparatus of language. Because theoretical reflection domesticates expression by organizing it, thematizing along the grand narratives and essentialized structures of occidental history, becoming aware of this tendency in our own dealings with subaltern texts will mean resisting tendencies to fall prey to these conventions—specifically, by deautomatizing our mode of engagement with subaltern texts, by not using their speech acts, agency, and embodiment as a mirror to ourselves.

If, according to Spivak, speaking as a subaltern subject precludes the possibility of being heard as such (due primarily to a lack of access to the acknowledged system of representation), then the “auto-referential self-sufficiency that is the basis of formalist reading practices” cannot adequately hear/read for voices which fall outside that *standard* for discourse.¹⁰³ Furthermore, if it is the case that “testimony has as its goal the mental, physical, and spiritual decolonization of the third world”¹⁰⁴, then it must be said that to self-legitimate presupposes a necessary degree of autonomy from the apparatus (be it state, cultural, or ideological) from which one is attempting to gain autonomy. Autonomy, from the Greek *auto* (self) and *nomos* (custom, law), gains literal expression as the ability to be a law unto one’s self, as having the quality of independence by living through self-directive laws.

In the case of Western history, the Law is seen as transcendent rational structures that fundamentally and inextricably condition discursive practices (insofar as practices are always predicated by a historical matrix). However, because the monolithic nature of Western history makes it difficult, if not impossible to self-legitimate from a position of exteriority—that is, from outside the sedimented structures of Western history, new discursive models therefore necessitate a *new historiography*. To this end, given the constitutive view of language as engenderer of experience, new forms of linguistic exchange are also needed to support the conventions of a subterranean history surfacing from the crust of official history. In cases where the official story silences situations of bondage, repression, and the struggle for survival, the emergence of new discursive models is not a theoretical commodity, but in many ways a method of survival; thus, “testimonial writing is foremost an act, a tactic by means of which people engage in the process of self-constitution and *survival*”¹⁰⁵.

Subaltern histories emerge from a corrective effort, material and intellectual, of the grand narratives that subsume their existence to the margins, where they cannot be read for without a magnifying glass, if at all. As a tactic designed to provide emancipatory access to codified systems of representation by challenging hegemonic interpretations of history, testimonial literature signifies an attempt to decolonize the resources expression in a manner advantageous to subjects positioned in historically non-dominant cultures. It is thus seen primarily as a tool; George Yúdice, for example, notes that

“Testimonial writing...coincides with one of the fundamental tenets of postmodernity: the rejection of what Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) calls grand or master narratives, which function to legitimize ‘political or historical teleologies,...or the great ‘actors’ and ‘subjects’ of history—the nation-state, the proletariat, the party, the West, etc.”¹⁰⁶.

If there appears to be a disjuncture between the universal regulatory mechanisms the institution of Western literature espouses and the phenomenon of testimonial writing, it is incumbent upon us to examine the justificatory authority of *literature* to legitimize the discursive practices of subaltern subjects in situations where literacy and writing have themselves become uncontested, dominant narratives. By contrast, “as the voice of a singular subject, testimonio [is] almost by definition a petit récit, or in Ranajit Guha’s

phrase “the small voice of history”¹⁰⁷. It is this small voice, this recalcitrant history, to which we now turn our attention.

Etymologically, *Testimonio*, from the Latin *testimonium*, is derived from *testis*, meaning “testes” or, as a secondary (and telling) meaning, “witness” and *monium*, a suffix signifying a “state, action” or “condition”. It bears a strong relationship to *testamentum*, also Latin, for testament. The latter, a noun, originates from the verbal forms of *testari*, “to make a will” (which is also rooted in *testis*) and *facere* “to make” (as in *testificari*)¹⁰⁸. “Testimony” is therefore the publication (in an older sense of oral vocalization) of an account of events, states, or conditions to which one has borne witness. The authority to testify is in part derived from the historical position of male privilege; reliability in witnessing and male virility are synonymously complicit in the Latin root “testis”, and would be expected in keeping with the relative position of males in classical society.

The confluence of the legal and religious connotations of testimony, as the term is used today, however, are not themselves rooted in the original meaning of *testimonium*, but rather are *abstracted* through the subjective structures of abstract (objective) legalism and Christianity characteristic of the colonial importations of Western systems of signification. It is a *historical* event, the conquest of the Americas, which supported this framework and from which any discussion of *testimonio* must begin.

As Beverley defines it, *testimonio* is “a novel or novella-length narrative in book form or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or a significant life experience”.¹⁰⁹ This articulation of testimonial literature as a genre, modeled after Miguel Barnet’s account of the form, has become standard in critical readings of *testimonio*. It is also a definition in collusion with Marxist interpretations of discursive strategy, interpretations which, as teleologically driven accounts of historically determinist material forces, often overlook more nuanced historical precedents inherent in the form, such as language.

In 1492, a watershed year marking rapid shifts in human relations and constructions of culture, a University of Salamanca scholar named Antonio Nebrija wrote a grammatical tract, *Gramática de la Lengua Castellana*, which had widespread implications for discursive practices in the colonies. As the first systematized compendium of a romance language, Nebrija’s tract thematized the Castilian language through rules in usage of expression. In her article, “Language and Empire: the Vision of Nebrija” La Rosa effectively argues for the homogenizing aspects of colonial language policy by examining the imperialist tendencies inherent in Nebrija’s works; to this effect, she quotes Nebrija’s well-known dictum that “language has always been the perfect instrument of empire”.¹¹⁰ Castilian, the official language of the Spanish crown and *lingua franca* for official business and mercantile relations, was of course, not the only language operative in Spain; Catalanian, for example, was also predominantly spoken at the time. However, as the official language, it is the one imported to the colonies as a grammar,

chiefly for the purposes of consolidating the unification (or should I say, domestication) process throughout the various, multilingual Amerindian peoples.

In this light, Spanish is the language of Spain, of European *empire* and is the most potent, homogenizing facet of conquest. It is the most powerful because it covers over forms of expression which grew organically alongside experiences Amerindian languages traditionally sought to represent. As a cultural apparatus, language draws its forms from the traditional storytelling compositions existent in the cultural matrix of this speaker; if experience is narrated and understood as fragmentary, discontinuous events, it may for instance take the form of paratactic structures of signification, as opposed to syntactical ones. However, when there exists a foreign imposition of normative frameworks, it is language which houses and transmits those foreign conventions *at the level of the unheard*, giving off the false appearance of normalcy and domestic familiarity of those conventions.

Nonetheless, in lieu of this, subaltern subjects are charged with the task of deploying the language of the colonizer in anti-colonial struggles. This, perhaps, is one of the biggest difficulties *testimonialistas* experience in their discursive attempts, namely, that language reproduces certain conventions not easily seen by us, and thus creates the conditions ripe for feelings of frustration, disappointment, and co-optment by neocolonialist forces *at home* with those conventions. It is in the context of this problematic that the methodological issues and problems surrounding *testimonio* arise: the role of the interlocutor, communal multivocality, reliability, contestations of authenticity, and interpretive authority.

What we can be sure of at the present time is that “more than any other form of writing in Latin America, the *testimonio* has contributed to the demise of the traditional role of the intellectual/artist as spokesperson for the ‘voiceless’”¹¹¹.

From the standpoint of literature, the conceptualization of a new literary genre called *testimonio* in Latin America began officially in the second half of the twentieth century as discursive attempts to bear witness to the oppression and human rights abuses enacted by post-colonial reorganizations of government in the form of brutal military and dictatorial regimes. For example, in the Guatemalan strain, states Zimmerman,

“beyond the chronicles of the Quichés and Cakchicals at the time of the Conquest and the countless ethnographic accounts over the years, modern *testimonio* in Guatemala had its first major stirrings in fictional and autobiographical prose (Wyld Ospina, Arévalo Marínez, Asutrias, Cardoza y Aragón, Monteforte Teledo, etc.) dealing with the dictatorships of Manuel Estrada Cabrera and Jorge Ubico; and it had its early apogee with the accounts of the intervention of 1954, the United States and military maneuverings and the aftermath involving exile and imprisonment for so many national leaders.”¹¹²

Most significantly, it arose out of the many projects of liberation which preceded national independence movements in Latin America. But perhaps the most significant epoch for the proliferation and advocacy of the form as a *genre* arose from the ideological status afforded to it by the consolidators of the Nicaraguan revolution, the Sandinistas.

On July 20, 1979, immediately following its ascendancy to power, the new Sandinist government established a Ministry of Culture with the intent to make “decolonized” forms of cultural expression not just more visible in the new administration, but also more accessible to the public at large. Decree number 6 of the FSLN manifesto articulated a sweeping agenda in the arts under the title “Revolution in Culture and Education,” which insisted that in order to take back the state which had oppressed them, Nicaraguans must also take back the culture which supported such a state. Raul Quintanilla, new director of the National School for the Visual Arts, observes:

“Through the revolution, we earned the right to freedom of expression, and thus set for ourselves the task of re-appropriating part of the heritage that had been taken from us throughout 500 years of colonialism as well as neo-colonialism... with this in mind, we looked in a newly liberated way at the Eurocentric nature of much contemporary art; we wanted to construct a new visual and poetic language that engaged everyone in everything”.¹¹³

The revolutionary government employed a new kind of socialist pluralism through a vast national system of *Centros Populares de Cultura* (national cultural centers for the people) where Nicaraguan peasants were taught by trained officials how to express their feelings about the revolution, a changing culture, or about life in general through “testimonial poetry”. The new cultural centers represented an attempt by the new government to foster a collective sense of a national identity amongst the rural masses. Most poignantly, the project was seen and marketed abroad as part of a larger attempt to democratize culture and the means of producing it through socializing aesthetic production. This new aesthetic product would be free, according to the Sandinistas, of “neocolonial penetration.”¹¹⁴

Hence, it was as an oppositional discourse to traditional interpretations of the postcolonial condition that testimonio first took roots. Subsequent to this, testimonio attempts to document situations of bondage and oppression, and, although it has its historical precedence in the chronicles of the conquest it “differs from the traditional testimonial genre [of the conquest] in its focus on the popular classes and the people “without history”.¹¹⁵

Originally coined as a term by the ethnologist Miguel Barnet (1969, 1981) in a “manifesto” format, *testimonio* was first rigidly defined against a backdrop of conventionalist epistemic frameworks found most commonly in the natural sciences, that of realism. Of the many testimonial theorists, most notably González Echevarría (1980), Casas (1981), Fornet (1977), Foster (1984), Jara and Vidal (1986), and Beverley (1989, 2004) by employing the standards set forth by their respective disciplines of anthropology, literature, and political science, none were able to construct a definition of *testimonio* which would protect the genre from the positivist attacks of David Stoll since the same epistemology was employed in the original construction of the term: therefore, it must answer to it or risk contradiction.

It was only until the Polish theorist and writer Elizabeta Skledowska (1992) criticized these approaches (specifically she critiques Barnett and Randall) that the constraining categories surrounding the formal articulation of testimonio began to loosen. With Lyotard's notion of the *differend* in mind ("where a dispute is carried out according to the terms and language of one of the parties to the dispute")¹¹⁶ Skledowska unveils how it becomes possible under such restrictions to carry out equitable discourse for the subaltern testimonial subject. If the task at hand is to strip away the corraling standards of the witness box (appeals to truth) to acknowledge the right of the witness to speak as the plaintiff, we must also face the fragmentary nature of existence. Specifically, the critic and interpreter of *testimonio* must see that "the discourse of a witness cannot be a reflection of his or her experience, but rather a refraction determined by the vicissitudes of memory, intention, ideology"¹¹⁷ and in so doing acknowledge how it that "a plaintiff is deprived of the means of arguing and by this fact becomes a victim"¹¹⁸. When seen in this manner, interpretive practices of testimonial literature themselves reproduce subalternity by remaining uncritical of the normative epistemic frameworks employed in the process of interpretation.

To this end, even in a project such as the one undertaken herein, which strives to clarify some of the methodological difficulties faced by the subaltern speaker in cross-cultural communication, it must be said that the conceptual models regulating the discursive norms of subaltern cultural production are not easily extractable; in order to speak with urgency, at times, it may be the case that normative language, in some form of another, is always going to have to be deployed in the effort. However, the distinction lies on our level of awareness to this fact.

Like the flaps of a manta ray sailing downstream, covering over with its shadow all that its wingspan can encompass, discursive practices modeled on privileged conceptual frameworks, although fluid in appearance, end up corraling the speaking subject inside the auspices of the epistemology in question—inside its shadow. It is a shadow from which one cannot escape, no salvational light towards which it can crawl, but whose obfuscating effects *can* be effectively mitigated through an *articulation* and *awareness* of its existence. Rather than asking "what does it mean for the subaltern subject to be the producer of knowledge, or can such an act be represented (and if so, by whom?), the question should be: where does that which is given to the knowing subject originate, and can those origins account for the epistemic subordination of the post-colonial subject as a producer of knowledge?

Henceforth, the thrust towards a totalizing, rational apprehension of the natural world, then, can be explained as one wherein "human beings recognize each other by virtue of being reasonable. The standard of rational deliberation, not that of cross-cultural recognition, is ultimately what binds together human beings from different cultures" (Schutte, 1993: 137). However, as earlier stated, rational deliberation can only grasp what is recognized as rational, as existing. In the case where certain unrecorded histories are in question, then, what is to become of the subjects absent from the official story? Do they not find representational form in translation from one culture to another? How do you

begin to represent someone who is not even acknowledged as existing? And, without this understanding, how can one create the conditions favorable for them to represent *themselves*? You begin by reading for the gaps in the story, the silences. As Edward Said notes of the history of the Indian masses, those covered over by an official colonial history,

“subaltern history in literal fact is a narrative missing from the official story of India...thus we find frequent reference to such things as gaps, absences, lapses, ellipses, all of them symbolic of the truths that historical writing is after all writing and not reality, and that as subalterns their history as well as their historical documents are necessarily in the hands of others” (Said, 1988: vii).

The ‘others’ in question are not so much the colonial administrators but rather the *tools* of the colonial administrators: the logic of historiography. Thus, the ‘gap-in-knowledge’ now reemerges, but now in the context of contestations of power. In an effort to consolidate a cohesive rebraiding of a shattered identity (one assigned with value), since the sixteenth century onwards Latin America has been engaged in a normativized rebuttal, a reactive dialogue grappling with the legacy and imprint of coloniality. As we, the progeny of a colonized epistemology, have, generation by generation, slowly ‘grown into’ this logocentric understanding of our selves and world as a way of making sense of things, something else has been lost, covered up, concealed. Yes, among the many consequences which the colonial importation of foreign epistemic and linguistic frameworks had on Amerindian cultural identity is the creation of an apparent normalcy...of the inability to articulate suspicions, residual echoes of older understandings because our current worldview cannot easily accommodate their contradictory logic, especially if the task at hand is to communicate once again using colonial narrative logic in order to survive. Everyday and for the most part, whilst attempting to telegraph urgent conditions of bondage, we abandon other projects, such as relating subtler states of cultural schizophrenia.

Hence, in order to understand the pedagogical need for a novel approach to the problem of bridging culturally differentiated epistemic frameworks (especially within one’s self, to fall on Kristeva’s notion of “the stranger within”), it is vital to adequately grasp the ways in which Latin American discursive acts are always *already* situated in a cross-cultural context, projecting ‘meaning’ through everyday communiqués only insofar as the intended message is laden with both colonial acculturation to world entities (i.e. thinking of speech acts reductively as “thought content”) *and* residual, underground traces of Amerindian heritage. The tension between these phenomenon is manifested largely through a perpetual managing of states of anxiety, frustration, and a sense of dislocation.

To date, unfortunately, negotiating this tension effectively has come to mean sublimating the strange, unarticulable suspicion that what is being said is not all one wishes to say on a matter—just merely *what makes sense to say* given the tools we’re pre-given with which to make sense of things. I say unfortunately because rather than approximate what one means to say, the opportunity of representing one’s self on more equitable terms is lost, again, by sublimation; by fleeing into comforting metaphysical

narratives or mimetic stances such as rogue memorization of the ‘correct’ interpretation, religious conviction, or through deploying a psychology of defensive self-assiduity such as that taken up by many upper-class meztizo men and women. To say to them they are not ‘western,’ then, is many times taken up as an implicit suggestion that they are therefore ‘Indians’—a term which carries derogatory and offensive value in Latin America. And yet, in light of the claim that Latin American discursive practice begins from a stance of inequality, there can be no doubt that in the hierarchy of privileged speaking positions certain Latin American voices are sure to carry more declarative legitimacy than others (depending on the degree of successful deployments of western narrative logic...the side one is thought to be perpetually crossing over to), yet even *those* declarative stances are themselves circumscribed within the cross-cultural context of Iberian influence and western cross-pollination.

Speaking from the stance of subalternity, however, entails the inability to represent oneself due to a lack of access to systems of representation and thus acquiring a marginal declarative authority. Representing oneself, specifically to Western culture, then, becomes particularly difficult when the self is a hybrid derivative of an epistemological cross-pollination *and also bears the double burden of a subaltern speaking position*. This double burden is, in part, created by the cultural denigration and negative value attached to devalued subjects: Indians. For example; while the upper-class mestiza woman may feel herself culturally superior to her indigenous maid, the mestiza woman’s situatedness within the ossified matrix of a cross-cultural context will not be readily evident to her because she does not *feel* herself *different* from the culturally dominant culture responsible for her epistemic oppression, but only from what she perceives to be *the* culturally inferior subculture: that of the Indian woman. It is a comfortable psychological stance which serves a pragmatic function; it etches out a semblance of an identity based on the negation of others, even though the upper-class mestiza woman may herself be the negated identity against which North American women may situate themselves from above. When the mestiza woman, she is neither against the indigenous Indian woman nor the North American woman, but *herself*; in engaging in an antagonistic relation (for and against), the mestiza woman is perpetually tied to the binary system of representation which foils her identity from achieving self-constancy.

In the context of intercultural communication, then, these ‘internal’ collisions appear, to the unfixing ear of western culture, as ‘contradictions’ in the Latina’s discursive attempts: as a seemingly entrenched inability to be, as it were, *reasonable*. It must be maintained, however, that this contradiction is not *sui generis*, ungrounded in historicity, or subjective; no, it is the result of the inequitable and unjustified imposition of culturally dominant world views onto peripheral cultures in the world stage. And, since practices of imposition are meted out by manifestations of power, it becomes necessary to “unveil the operative conditions of power that ceaselessly intervene in the representation and dissemination of communication” (Natter et al., 1995: 7). If it is the case that “Latin America has *not* participated in decolonization” (Spivak, 1993: 57), a startling claim in light of flurried activity of various alleged projects of epistemic and cultural decolonization which followed movements of independence-- we must take heed.

Unless the multidimensional nature of the exchange between culturally differentiated subjects is adequately acknowledged, attempts at intercultural communication will result in contradiction because Latin American discursivity is itself coming from a stance of contradiction. And, because cross-cultural communication has often come to mean, in the West, coming *over* to one's side (the side of the victors in colonial history), intercultural communication has hereto been more a project of translation for the culturally dominant culture and, conversely, one of mimetic performance on the part of the recessive, colonized culture. If the representational model of agency is underpinned by a dichotomous representability/ unrepresentability distinction, and if "the problem is not just to represent [the subaltern subject] but to create conditions that would enable it to represent itself", out of two possible choices, a *third* way is needed (Coronil, 2004: 237). It is in part the failure of traditional models of critiquing intercultural communication, ways which deploy dualistic systems of binaries (such as truth/falsity, cohere/inchoate, meaningful/meaningless) which now necessitate angiogenesis: the growth of altogether new bloodlines, new ways of (un)learning to pay attention—to *let* attention *happen*.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hearing (for) the World of the Other: A Response to the Problem of Cross-Cultural Communication

“What does it mean for an ear (be) open?”
--Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger's Ear*

Leaping out from the starting gate, our guiding question since the beginning of this thesis has been “can the subaltern *speak*,” as illustrated through a close analysis of the subaltern narrative, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. In that careful reading, a response emerged synonymous with Spivak’s way of appending her own question; namely, that *no*, “the Indian can’t speak up for what he wants” (103). As subaltern, the Indian can only speak by becoming not-Indian; by giving up, whether by exhaustively surrendering or violent extraction, Indian practices and cultural habits. What’s more, their last bastion of *résistance*, their language, cannot adequately signify what one means to say when forced to speak through a foreign metric of expressibility; that is to say, through the discursive *mechanisms* of a non-Indian culture. Rather than “genuine” dialogue, *incommensurability* is what emerges from cross-cultural communication attempts.

Throughout the project I also operated under what in literary circles is known as a reader-oriented theory of interpretation. The distinction is this: “while *literary* criticism is equally concerned with making ‘meaning’, the focus is generally more on extracting meaning from the text rather than making explicit *the process by which readers, or the critic, make meaning*,”¹¹⁹. Naturally, to prove my point, I could not have started out on the basis of this theory, for whereas we commenced by taking a magnifying glass to our subject of study—the “small voice” of subaltern history and discursivity, what we found on the other side of that glass—was a *mirror*. Yet this had to be brought out of concealment through an active process rather than *assumed* from the beginning, because, above all, my approach to reading is never fixed, finished, but remains open-ended: as a method, there is no right destination. Yet at this point of our project we can confidently address this finding (of treating the other as mirrors to ourselves) by rephrasing the question “can the subaltern speak” into “can the hegemonic ear hear anything” other than the frequencies it already recognizes *as recognizable* frequencies?

In effect, this shifts the object of study from the voice of the subaltern to how readers/ listeners constitute meaning in linguistic transactions. Because theoretical reflection, as we have seen, domesticates expression in the very act of reflection, gazing upon the subaltern voice in an effort to extract meaning from it is tantamount to re-silencing it; it obfuscates the ways in which the voice of the subaltern can be raised to the

level of the explicit by covering up the act of *letting* something happen to you, by letting meaning emerge on its own. This requires a certain level of releasement, of letting go on the part of the listener so that one can hear for the first time frequencies that were always previously present, but for which our maltuned ears were unequipped. Nothing is more difficult to hear, after all, than dissonance. Nietzsche reminds us:

“hearing something new is embarrassing and difficult for the ear; foreign music we do not hear well. When we hear another language we try involuntarily to form the sounds we hear into words that sound more familiar and more like home to us.”¹²⁰

But, as we have seen through our reading of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, we can also ‘hear,’ metaphorically speaking, through our eyes:

“Our eye finds it more comfortable to respond to a given stimulus by reproducing once more an image that it has produced many times before, instead of registering what is different and new in an impression. The latter would require more strength...”¹²¹

“To understand one another,” then, as Nietzsche says, “it is not enough that one use the same words; one also has to use the same words for the same species of inner experiences; in the end one has to have one’s experience in *common*”¹²². For Menchú, as for Nietzsche, knowledge is experiential: “we learned all this by watching what has happened in our lives” (134), by paying very careful attention to the lived world. The gap between the subaltern speaker and the Western interlocutor thus widens immensely when one presumes to be able to understand the Other’s situation without actually having to *live* it. This is why Menchú, who reserves the term “friend” for a very selective number of foreigners or *Ladinos*, lauds so much admiration to an upper-class academic who taught Menchú how to write and speak Spanish:

“He was someone who’d been able to study, who had a profession and everything...He preferred to help the CUC rather than become a member because he said: ‘I don’t deserve to be called peasant. I’m an intellectual.’ He recognized his inability to do or know many things that peasants know, or the things poor people know. He said: ‘I can’t talk about hunger the way a peasant can’”(166).

By contrast, those who assume to be able to know the other, to be able to translate what the subaltern means to say through the violence of translation, do not recognize their stance as distancing—as polarizing rather than magnetic. As a child, Menchú recalls this bias when trying to speak to Belgian nuns: “The nun didn’t notice, she went on talking. She was foreign, she wasn’t Guatemalan” (119). The point here is this: if one were to (hypothetically speaking) successfully ‘cross-over’ into the normative framework of the foreign speaker simply through learning *the foreigner’s language*, this would not ensure *meaning* is achieved, for in learning a new language one learns what is previously *unconcealed* for learning, what shows up *as* knowledge, language, vocabulary, and norms to learn. In actuality, the *operative* norms of a culture may very well be learned only through slowly *growing into* the culture, as Menchú contends. To recall, a child born to the natural world is *not* just born into the world of the community: “he *very slowly* becomes a member of it” (10). Trying to understand a foreign culture by assuming it

fundamentally converges with what we take *all* humans to be—to share as universal attributes—is perhaps a prejudice of an atomistic worldview that reduces lived human experience to physical states. The atomistic worldview does not account for collapses in meaning, nor of what it means to be human outside of its own, limited construction of being; this is because, after all, like the ubiquity of humanism, it has prevailed in the current historical equation. Menchú, by contrast, is more candid about recognizing the discordance produced by experiencing foreign cultures, which for her means encountering not ideas, but what a foreign culture uses everyday. She says:

“When we reached the capital, I saw cars for the first time. I thought they were animals just going along...when I went to the city for the first time, I saw it as a monster, as something alien, different...those houses, I thought, ‘this is the world of the *ladinos*’” (25, 28).

Yet the *Ladinos*, in popular Western understanding, are Guatemalans; little if no differentiation is often made between rural and urban Guatemalans, between Indians and *Ladinos*. Yet “for me it was the world of the *ladinos*. We were *different*” (32). What happens, then, when one is forcibly thrust into that world, whether through a language or physically? To fend off conditions of starvation at home, Menchú, at thirteen, left her community to work as a maid in the capital, Guatemala City:

“My time working as a maid [in the capital]...made me very confused. Yes, I was very confused. I went through a sort of painful change within myself. It wasn’t so difficult for the rest of them at home to understand what was real and what was false. But I found it very hard” (122).

The result of this experience on Menchú’s sense of orientation in life is painfully frank: “I was very ashamed at being so confused,” (121) she tells us. Yet rather than “respond to [the] stimulus by reproducing once more an image that it has produced many times before,” as Nietzsche so poignantly put it, Menchú does not flee the anxiety and confusion this experience provoked (by concealing its effect on her) but rather tries to confront it as the painful experience that it is. She does this by trying to carefully *describe* it.

In *The Postcolonial Critic*, to frame the operation of the writing of the colony, Spivak explains how the determination of colony takes place through workday activities—the civilizing mission of the “worlding of the worlds”—based on a reading of Heidegger’s *Origin of the Work of Art*.¹²³ She writes:

[The colonial administrator is] “actually engaged in consolidating the Self of Europe by obliging the native to cathect the space of the Other on his home ground... He is worlding *their own world*.”¹²⁴

Writing the colony through official colonial history, Spivak tells us, became possible only by colonizing the workday activities, the everyday tasks of living. This became possible through the importations, as noted in the historical introduction to our second chapter, of the homogenizing mechanisms of colonial language, religion, and

politics *as applied to daily activities*. It is through the colonization of the workday that the grafting of particular worldviews onto foreign scaffolding in such a way as to cover over this very action—to conceal the imposition through an apparent normalcy—was made possible. This is why, after repeating her workday activities (however exploitative) on a routine basis, and by living in the city, “when I was older,” she tells us, “I didn’t find it strange any more” (25). In light of this, I view language in the same role as workday activities because it is an every-present, continual tool which itself constitutes meaning. This is partly what I take the expression “decolonizing the resources of expression” to mean for the subaltern Speaker—that speaking in the wake of the colonial encounter always entails a prior undertaking of *unspeaking* the colonialist representation of Speech proper, yet in so doing risk losing the practical instrument, however inadequate, through which one can be legitimately heard *at all*— as, for example, in learning Spanish and its syntactical conventions versus other native languages (and in Guatemala, there are twenty-four indigenous languages).

But to go back to a *reader*-oriented theory, the task of helping decolonize the resources of expression also falls on the listeners in a linguistic exchange, not just the speakers: in the postcolonial era, we ought try and read a history as that which is not necessarily written *in* the text, but *though* which the text is written. It is the socio-historical background we’ve placed so much emphasis on throughout this thesis. As Leo Strauss demonstrates in his powerful book, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, throughout modern history even the authors of Western philosophical texts have had to write in Morse codes to avoid persecution, censorship, or death. It is no coincidence, he points out, that Descartes had to write from inside a cold, candle-lit *cave*. In light of this, Strauss argues, a different way of reading texts is needed, one that scans not the lines *but between the lines*. The narrative that emerges from *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, then, has less to do with what she said but with *what she couldn’t say*. By staying aware of the tremendous difficulty Menchú faced in speaking (by virtue of the marginalized nature of her situation of enunciation), and by knowing my role as accomplice in making this difficulty possible through conventional reading practices, this is how the narrative emerged for me:

“When my mother needed help to bury my brother, we couldn’t talk to anyone, we couldn’t communicate, and she was desolate at the sight of my brother’s body. I remember only being able to communicate with the others through signs. Most of time we have had the same experiences; every day we’re stuck in situations in which *we can’t call on help from outside*” ... “I had a lot of ideas but I knew I couldn’t express them all” ... “The lawyer was a *ladino* and didn’t understand our language, so we had to get an intermediary to interpret for him. From the beginning the landowners paid the interpreters *not to say what we said*” ... “that’s when I told myself: ‘I must learn to speak Spanish, so that we don’t need intermediaries’” ... “The *ladino* has many ways of making his voice heard...he doesn’t need an intermediary. *He* has more channels of access” ... “the most distressing thing for us was not being able to speak”.

And so, “if definitions of *testimonio* are indeed symptomatic of what we look for when we read with *testimonio*-seeing eyes,”¹²⁵ it is incumbent upon us to try to see/hear differently, not by seeing with altogether different eyes (since to remember, the

hermeneutic situation is inescapable), but by destabilizing the assumption that ours is the only way of seeing, the only way that matters. The conventionalism of our reading practices today are perhaps best described by Nietzsche. He writes:

“Just as little as a reader today reads all of the individual words (let alone syllables) on a page—rather he picks about five words at random out of twenty and “guesses” at the meaning that probably belongs to these five words—just as little do we see a tree exactly and completely with reference to leaves, twigs, color, and form; it is so much easier for us to simply improvise some approximation of a tree. Even in the midst of the strangest experiences we still do the same: we make up the major part of the experience and can scarcely be forced *not* to contemplate some event s its “inventors”.¹²⁶

We can now see how Stoll’s own way of seeing, of reading Menchú, in its listening for *his own world*, covers over how it is he’s already constructing a misbegotten picture of Menchú’s world. This is why I choose to call his reading of Menchú neo-colonialist, because it re-inscribes the methods by which indigenous worldviews became deligitimized through (mis) appropriation. Stoll’s book makes sense only within an interpretive framework based on positivist notions of the existence of “truth”, of an error-free position capable of achieving something like a ‘correct’ interpretation of worldviews, however different from one’s own. To remember, as a metaphysical scheme, it is a god’s eye view, a view from nowhere that gives the signifier a sense of having justificatory authority to signify, because it claims to be neutral, ‘objective’. It is in this sense, “instrumentalizing”.

Yet to recall our first chapter, the interpretive reflex underpinning the possibility for intelligibility and understanding of other cultures is itself culturally and historically conditioned. That is to say, with regard to Stoll’s viewpoint, the way in which he reappropriates Menchú’s discourse within a positivist scaffolding lends itself to scrutiny because it is a historical bias he himself fails to see or acknowledge. Yes, naturalistic thinking is ‘what one does’, the set of instructions one follows, when brought up into a specific Western understanding of the world which privileges a logocentric account of being, yet the logocentric account is not the *only* account of being in the world, and it is in this sense of the word, *perspectival*. Since this hermeneutic prejudice is inescapable, it is a limitation when it is not acknowledged, but also a site for the possibility of dialogue *when it is*. When deployed as a monologic, ubiquitous perspective swathed over the speaking practices of different cultures, logocentric, naturalistic frameworks become instrumentalizing. This quality of Western communicative practice subverts cross-cultural communication because, by virtue of its reappropriative practices, it holds all the cards on one side the way religious fundamentalisms hold ‘truth’ on theirs; with the essential nature of god as infallible, believers close themselves off to the possibility of engaging with nonbelievers, who, by definition, can never be right. Nonbelievers can come to represent themselves only at the moment they speak the language of the godhead. Thus dialogue between them is perpetually stillborn. Correspondingly, under the auspices of “Science” proper, whichever side of a dispute can claim adherence to the one true faith of neutral objectivity, wins. What is at stake to be won is of great importance: the ability to be heard.

What is gained from this exchange seems at first to be the justificatory *authority* to legislate and define the essential nature of the empirical world as that which remains constant through change, is knowable by minds, intelligible in its predictability, and to which we can attribute discernable properties and patterns. Life becomes *controllable*. When the scientific subject encounters uncontrollable situations, volcanic conditions which force the human eye to venture “and how?”—how is this scenario possible? How could such carnage and human frailty stem from our enlightened era? The question therefore mutates into: how can I rescue the fundamental tenets of my faith in humanism, progress, and modernity? And moreover, how can I save *myself* in this equation, in these times of uncertainty and transmutation? As Nietzsche tells us, “the values of a human begin betray something of the *structure* of his soul and where it finds its conditions of life, its true need”.¹²⁷ Objective, foundational truth, in this sense, is perhaps another immortality scheme produced from the seduction of timelessness, a freedom from the contingencies of lived experience, of which suffering is a part. Menchú’s worldview, rather than flee from contingency, embraces it: “if we didn’t suffer, perhaps we wouldn’t think of this as life,” she says, for there would be no points of resistance, no struggles definitive of lived experience (193).

The detached, spectator attitude of the contemplative scientist thus tries to analyze his way into an answer rather than let the gravity of the questions seep into him; analytic ‘looking into’ is thus a looking away, an attempt to conceal the existence of interpretive monopolies through the internecine insistence on the *universality* of foundational narratives. It must be the case universals exist, otherwise, mastery over the world falls away.

And who could bear that burden, of asking themselves: *how could a quarter of a million Indians be dead from a war we started?* A war ushered in by Empire, by colonialism, by indifference to any way of life different from our own? Subaltern histories implicate Stoll in this equation. Perhaps this is why he so firmly heralds and upholds the right of the rational voice to prevail, for it’s the one voice that can say: what we did was justifiable, a way of life was at stake, capitalism *had* to persevere—the red threat of communism was met with justifiable force... even if communists only wanted “land reform,” surely it would have been a matter of time before their viewpoint crept into our borders, uprooting our everyday practices: Arbenz *had* to go.

Only it was not only Arbenz, or Allende, or even Guevara. It was the historical infiltration and displacements of self-referential practices in the Americas by Empire; it was the loss of the right to self-govern, the right to self-legislate, which became characteristic of the postcolonial condition as seen in the Subaltern’s inability to be heard on their own terms. Moreover, official history, as exemplified in the document coffers of the Central Intelligence Agency, does not record accuracy, historical fidelity, but *justifications*; instrumental rationales for the stances we take according to the perspectives our interpretative possibilities will buttress. CIA documents therefore can only tell us why we did what we did by giving explanations, ironically concealing *that* we did it. We need not answer to our actions as a nation since an answer already exists, in the Orwellian language of bureaucracy stitching official memorandums together.

Hence, in the spectator attitude that is so detrimental to communicating with Others, we treat the Other as a mirror because we cannot bear to look at the alternative of staring elsewhere than at ourselves, to the perhaps uncanny contingencies and struggles threading through a “less developed” world. This is why theoretical attitudes have a predilection for being deployed from more developed, “first” world countries; because the appearance of stability has been most successfully sold and cultivated there. In turn, positivist research methodologies displace more heuristic methods of describing phenomena insofar as flux cannot be accommodated by rule-following, by insistence on accuracy.

When flux, which is always laden in the human condition, comes into the foreground of existence by way of violent eruptions in history, by profound destabilization of cultural practice à la the colonial encounter, *communiqués* can no longer be sent, shouted, or written across borders: they must be smuggled. The disparity in the originating equality of speaking positions between subaltern narrators and Western interpreter/interlocutors hence necessitates a strategy of speaking which may involve saying just what the Western ear is believed capable of hearing, what it will selectively reach for. This is not to be taken as “manipulative” on the part of subaltern subjects, but rather the product of a long historical shift in indigenous systems of signification, from Mayan hieroglyphic codices to the linear subject-predicate grammar of chirographic cultures.

Hence, in order to delegitimize entry into official discourse, as Mary Louise Pratt argues, Stoll deploys a *reactive* stance commended with the task of resituating Western ways of understanding at the *center* of discourse again. The mushrooming of neocolonialist tendencies in social sciences, therefore, evidence the historical emergence of contestational forces seeking to displace occidental hegemonic narratives such as naturalism towards the margins of a new history ... “all of which suggests, perhaps, a testimonial reading of *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, as the personal account of the trajectory of a partisan subject whose people are undergoing a painful historical transition.”¹²⁸

Yet to recall, the existence of socially and historically situated interpretive frameworks within cultures are not the only structural determinants of narratological practices; it is also the *collapse* of those frameworks which influence *how* one says *what* one says. To this end, embroilment in volatile material conditions (such as war, armed struggle, or personal tragedy)—that is, being thrust into a matrix of unstable relations where the preservation of life is the driving force of all action—will fundamentally affect how a story gets told, what shows up or lights up with emphasis. What methodologies are employed in the undertaking also depends largely on concomitant aide from the graspable resources of memory... from what is left of those un-grounding experiences that the nervous system has not yet refilled in unverbalizable form and labeled under incommensurable, *lived* understanding. Sometimes, it is enough to know one has lived though something to challenge even the most historically trustworthy account to the contrary. What naturalism fails to account for, then, is the veritable ways in which human

beings experience a loss in meaning, a collapse in traditional points of reference-- some by grasping for the limited resources of language to verbalize the unnamable, others by responding to limit conditions through violent transgressions of normative scaffoldings. The subaltern speaker is always caught between these two stances--convention and transgression—between “anxiety” and the creative acclamation of cultures to seismic conditions.

And so, to survive, one makes do with what is within reach: If to communicate lived understanding to other cultures, especially under urgent material conditions, one is given a set of criteria to follow under the rubric of ‘language,’ one is consequently deprived of one’s own customary *means* of deploying that language, of the patterns distinctive to one’s own culture or memory of culture. The text thus becomes not a reflection of the self but of what the self must do in order to be recognized *as* a self by readers of social texts. Texts, as in words, as in grammar, detemporalize the lived understanding of suffering through translation into stable networks of signification. The psychodynamics of linear storytelling and the regulatory structuring of expression by cultural norms do violence to subaltern voices by imposing the interiorization of an already-privileged metric of exchange in discourse.

This is the hydra-headed nature of suffering. It is a dialogical struggle between what the self, in all its social and collective enfleshment, has borne witness to, and the ineffectual resources of social language to encapsulate that which resists disentanglement-- repackaging for public consumption. ‘It is tragedy, and it is mine’, feels the victim, yet not without simultaneously wishing to verbalize experience, where verbalization constitutes a social system of representation, a codeword for access into political matrixes and where the language of ‘social change’ is meted out between parties internal to the discourse.

And so then, in response to this struggle of incommensurability, reading Rigoberta Menchú *in context* means coming to grips with a pre-woven social and historical scaffolding from which the text emerges. As difficult an endeavor as this may be (since it cannot be adduced from simple readings of official accounts but from careful readings), it is important since history is what lets *context* be: it lets meaning emerge in particular ways to particular cultures. Because, as we go ‘forward’ we also carry with us our past, at the present moment it would be wise to return to where we first sat out from, from the proscriptions articulated as a response to the problem of cross-cultural communication: I said:

“And so, *letting be*, on this view, entails more than a type of “imaginative identification” with the Other. It requires an applied phenomenology to the practice of reading and to our own understanding of what a text is. Principally, we must understand what Spivak meant, following Heidegger, by “the *worlding* of worlds” that makes (im)possible genuine cross-cultural communication. In so doing, our goal then ought to be to hearken for, to hear how it is the Other *relates to herself* by rethinking (and this is one way among many) our current

understanding of narratology, not in terms of a static structure, but in terms of a dynamic event or *happening*".

Learning to let be is thus a precondition for creating openings favorable to equitable dialogue, since, as Menchú reminds us, "if [two people] don't discuss things they can't understand" (216). The momentous occasion Menchú's narrative provides lies in its describing *in explicit detail* how she relates to herself and others – not by what she thinks, but by what she does in her every day life. It would be a great loss if we, due to the stubborn unifixity of our ears, missed such an opportunity...an opportunity to set out *on the way to* dialogue with other cultures. As Menchú teaches us, "any element in nature can change man when he is *ready* for change" (135). Becoming *ready for change* is thus a late-coming, yet not altogether ancillary theme of this thesis; it has—to prove our point of learning to hear for the *unsaid* of the Said— been implicitly foretold in the negative critiques of Stoll's calcified position, a stance in which *Reason* proper is the real interlocutor, not Stoll in the way he understands himself to be *the* interlocutor of Menchú's discursive attempts. Opening up to other possibilities, other perspectives, will therefore require letting go, *relinquishing* a belief in the controllable nature of existence, of the many narratives and schemes we devise to overcome the limitations of time, of flux.

In closing, learning to hear for the *unsaid* that is at all times nested in the Said, through a careful attunement which brings the *unsaid* out of concealment, is the guiding claim of this thesis. It is thus the method I deploy when reading texts such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*; one that is without question mediated through my own way of understanding her, or what it means to be unable to speak. Yet it is a method I believe most helpfully deautomatizes our everyday engagement with the text, engagements that through their normative portent, can be instrumentalizing.

Fittingly, then, the last word belongs to Menchú, from whom—until the day I can eat what she eats, weave, dance, weep, or speak *as* she speaks—I've yet to earn the right to call, *Rigoberta*:

And "so, you see, it's a different world"... "of course, I need a lot of time to tell you all about my people, because it's not easy to understand just like that. And I think I've given some idea of that in my account" (57, 247).

NOTES

- ¹ The phrase ‘subaltern’ was first used by Antonio Gramsci in the “notes on Italian History” of his *Prison Notebooks*. There, he deployed the term as a stand-in for “proletariat” to escape prison censors; it also served to designate the class of peasants in southern Italy unintegrated by the bourgeois-led *resorgimento* (see, for example, Beverley, 1999: 11-13). Subsequently, the term has been used in different manners by critics in the fields of history, politics, anthropology, and cultural studies, to name a few. The most well-developed uses of the term, however, are those of Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Ranajit Guha—founding members of what has come to be known as the Subaltern Studies group. Guha sees the term “as a general attribute for subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, gender, or any other way” (Selected Subaltern Studies Reader, 1988: 43). Yet “for Spivak the subaltern is that which always slides under or away from representation...because simply by merging into representation...it loses the character of Subalternity”; she is concerned, moreover, “with the way in which elite representation effaces the effective presence of the subaltern” (Beverley, 1999: 101- 104).
- ² Due to historical (in)accessibility to systems of representation, my preference for using “she” derives, foremost, as an example of the need to de-automatize our unreflective practices and biases such as deploying “he” to signify both genders; it is a bias further sedimented by the conceptual model of Renaissance humanism and the leveling egalitarian tradition of the European Enlightenment.
- ³ See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1964.
- ⁴ See Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 1958.
- ⁵ Spivak’s essay has three versions; the first, which appeared in a 1985 edition of the journal *Wedge*, a second, more developed version which appeared in the 1988 volume of *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, and finally, a vastly expanded (100 page plus) version in Spivak’s 1999 publication of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.
- ⁶ For a candid discussion on the (mis)interpretation of Spivak’s two most prominent ideas—strategic essentialism and the (im)possibility of Subaltern discursivity, see Jenny Sharpe’s interview of her mentor, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, volume 28 (2003), pages 609–624.
- ⁷ Spivak, 1988, p. 300.
- ⁸ One reason the Western interlocutor is more likely to place his discourse at the center (rather than see it as a perspective) is that Colonial subjects, and most powerfully indigenous

(subaltern) subjects have a powerful reminder of the existence of a *different* perspective in colonization.

⁹ As quoted in Hartman, 1999, p. 347.

¹⁰ Although it is not made explicit in this chapter, for Schutte, the “principle of (cross-cultural) incommensurability” signifies an “attempt to designate the lack of complete translatability of various expressions or blocks of meaning between two or more linguistic-cultural symbolic systems” and “may also refer to incommensurable ways of thinking insofar as the differences are culturally determined” (cf. note 12). My use of the term alludes to this concept, albeit in a way that emphasizes both the *event* of having (mis)understood subaltern discursive attempts and the pre-woven, historical sediment which gives rise to conditions for the possibility of such events.

¹¹ Guha, 1988: 44.

¹² I owe the use of the term “culturally asymmetrical position” to Schutte, 1988: 54.

¹³ On March 10, 1999, during the Central American Summit held in Guatemala that year, Clinton gave the following remarks in response to a Guatemalan dignitary who brought up the issue of North American accountability for the ‘internal’ war in Guatemala: “For the United States it is important I state clearly that support for military forces and intelligence units, which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong. And the United States must not repeat that mistake...During the Cold War, when we were so concerned about being in competition with the Soviet Union, very often we dealt with countries in African and in other parts of the world based more on how they stood in the struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union than how they stood in the struggle for their own people’s aspirations to live up to the fullest of their God-given abilities...I am making great efforts to change our historical relations with Central America” (as qtd. in Lane, 1999: 8). This was the first time a sitting president had publicly conceded to a foreign country about being on “the wrong side” of a political and social struggle.

¹⁴ See Lutz. 2001: 60-89.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The peace accords signaled an “official” cessation to the violence. In reality, however, Indian removal politics continue, albeit in a less intense manner than a decade earlier, throughout Guatemala. Lutz (2001) details the continuation of human rights abuses and the struggle of Guatemala’s Indigenous population.

¹⁷ See Said, 1979.

¹⁸ Beverley, 2004: 11.

¹⁹ In the introduction to Gugelberger’s 1996 *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, an anthology of critical essays on *testimonio*, Gugelberger describes the genre as “a moment that has passed,” suggesting a type of conventionalism has reemerged in the disciplinary juncture of literature and politics. In 1999, in the wake of Stoll’s allegations against Menchú, the critical literature that emerged in response to the controversy (which sought to defend Menchú) underplayed the hereto canonical status of Gugelberger’s anthology, which itself was emblematic of critical trends towards seeing *testimonio* as a spin-off of “postmodernist play” (see Gorge Yudice, 1995, for example).

²⁰ Guha, 1988: vii.

²¹ Burgos-Debray and Rigoberta Menchú, 1983: preface.

²² See Arias, *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, 2001.

²³ The texts which did exits on testimonial practice (as in “giving one’s testimony”), such as C.A.S. Coady’s *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* stayed at the level of abstraction, that is, without social or historical contexts.

²⁴ Pratt, Mary Louise. “I, Rigoberta Menchú and the Culture Wars.” *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, ed. Arturo Arias. 2001: 29-30. (Henceforth *RMC*)

- ²⁵ Lyotard, 1988: 24.
- ²⁶ Narratology in the study of theories of narratives, particularly with regard to its structures and conventions. For this project, I am using the term generally in way, though many takes exist which differ significantly from one another. See, For example, Jahn, Manfred.. *Narratology: A Guide to the Theory of Narrative*. University of Cologne Press, 2005.
- ²⁷ This concept is not formulated to endorse the existence of a single ‘shared metric’ akin to Habermas’ construction of what he calls communicative rationality. The reservation lies in that the ‘assigned’ nature of such a metric can itself produce oppressive qualities by subjugating all discussants to the totality of *one* monolithic standard.
- ²⁸ An interesting question, one that cannot be adjudicated in the limited scope of this thesis, but is nonetheless of value to our metacritical project, is whether one could strategically induce *conditions* for breakdown for the purposes of deautomatizing our familiar everydayness with cultural presuppositions, thereby creating an opening in the conceptual framework corralling cross-cultural incommensurability. The problem would be twofold; first, such a notion could lead to unjustifiable acts of terrorism, and secondly, the very notion of replicating rupture would, in time, neutralize the destabilizing power of difference by normativizing the occurrence; in other words, it would become just another form of expression.
- ²⁹ As quoted in Carmack, 1988: 164.
- ³⁰ Castaneda, 2002: 23.
- ³¹ Ibid, 24.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Ibid, 25.
- ³⁴ As qtd. in Carmack, 1988: 167.
- ³⁵ Schutte, 1998: 54.
- ³⁶ Guha, 1988: 47.
- ³⁷ *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited C. Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua. Watertown, MA: Persephone. 1981.
- ³⁸ Carmack, 169, emphasis mine.
- ³⁹ Schutte, 1988: 55.
- ⁴⁰ William Luis has recently called attention to the socio-historical circumstances under which Barnett first theorized *testimonio* as a way to problematize the concretized nature of the genre. According to Luis, Barnett, whose artistic aspirations lay in poetry, not theory, drew on his day-trade as an Ethnologist to conceptualize testimonial literature in the wake of government censorship. Prior to writing his *Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*, Barnet had only written two books, both of poetry. William explains: “Barnet was associated with the second generation group of poets known as El Puente, named after a private publishing house of the same name which operated between 1960-65. In 1964, El Puente published [Barnet’s] second book of poetry, *Isla de Güijes*. But the El Puente group fell out of grace and was accused of stressing the aesthetic over the political. Regardless of their commitments to the Revolutionary movement, many group members were considered [by the Cuban government] antisocials and homosexuals and were sent to rehabilitation camps known as Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción. Those under detention, and others, were excluded from cultural and literary activities. During this period, Barnet had gone unpublished in Cuba” (Luis, 1989: 480-83).
- ⁴¹ Taylor, 44.
- ⁴² Beverley, 2004: 34.
- ⁴³ Gugelberger, 1996: ii.
- ⁴⁴ Taylor, 45
- ⁴⁵ Las Casas, 26.
- ⁴⁶ Horowitz, *Salon Magazine*, internet page.
- ⁴⁷ Beverley, 2004: 75, emphasis mine

- ⁴⁸ Stoll, 1998: 242.
- ⁴⁹ Beverley, 1999: 67.
- ⁵⁰ Time: explain the usage (not Heideggarian sense); quote Mayas' view of TIME in RMC
- ⁵¹ Contrary to popular belief, Maya civilization was not completely eradicated in the sixteenth century, but in the late seventeenth century.
- ⁵² Arias, 2001: 4-5.
- ⁵³ First used in the nineteenth century, the French used the term "Latin America" to recognize non-Iberian (Spanish and Portuguese) colonial territories in the Americas such as Guyana and Haiti, which were French holdings.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, 6.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, 27.
- ⁵⁶ Smith, Carol. "Why write and Expose of Rigoberta Menchú?" *RMC*, 155.
- ⁵⁷ Ong, 1988: 44.
- ⁵⁸ Beverley, "Margin at the center", 2004: 43
- ⁵⁹ Ibid
- ⁶⁰ Sommer, Doris. "Las Casas' Lies and Other Language Games" *RMC*, 243, 248.
- ⁶¹ Ibid, 242-43.
- ⁶² Ibid, 246.
- ⁶³ ibid
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, 248-249.
- ⁶⁵ Ong, 1988: 38.
- ⁶⁶ Sanford, 199: 38.
- ⁶⁷ See Joseph Rouse, *How Scientific Practices Matter: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- ⁶⁸ Stoll, 1999: 341.
- ⁶⁹ One reason Sanford, a highly regarded forensic anthropologist, may like to insist on the existence of material facts, and by relation, a use a notion of truth as objective, has to do with the nature of her work: since 1994, Sanford has been instrumental in uncovering and documenting (at risk to her personal safety) mass clandestine graves of murdered Mayas in Guatemala. The Governemnt's culture of impunity often bases itself on claims no such graves exist. Therefore, to initiate dialogue about the situation in Guatemala, Sanford's work has been instrumental in bringing charges against officials for human rights violations.
- ⁷⁰ Rohter, 1998: A1.
- ⁷¹ Ibid.
- ⁷² Stoll, 1999, vii.
- ⁷³ Ibid, 130.
- ⁷⁴ Menchú, "Those who attack me humiliate the victims". Interview with Juan Jesus Aznarez. *RMC*, 101.
- ⁷⁵ Stoll, 1999: xiv.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid, 155.
- ⁷⁷ Lutz, 2001: 31.
- ⁷⁸ "David Stoll Breaks His Silence," Interview with Dina Ramirez, *RMC*, 118.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid, 119.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid, 120. David Stoll presents the nature of his "work" in an overwhelmingly 'neutral' and objective manner; his official homepage at Middlebury College reads: "Since 1987 I've been doing field research on political violence and the peace process in Guatemala. Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala (1993) started out as an ethnography of an area in northern Quiché Department that suffered heavily in the violence. Based on my interviews with survivors, I found it necessary to question the left's interpretation of the war, including assumptions that have been picked up by the human rights movement. Since 1993 I've been

focusing on *contradictions facing the human rights movement* in this same region, how human rights imagery is generated, and how it affects local peacemaking. In terms of anthropology, my work involves debates over representation, authority and identity, as well as wider debates over political correctness, identity politics and *ideologies of victimization*. The most recent product of this research is Rigoberta Menchú and *The Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999). (www.middlebury.edu/anthropology/faculty/stoll.htm, emphasis mine).

- ⁸¹ Rohter, 1998.
⁸² Stoll, 1999: viii.
⁸³ Reprinted in *RMC*, 99.
⁸⁴ Arias, 2001: 51.
⁸⁵ Rohter, 1998.
⁸⁶ Interview with Juan Jesus Azanrez, 111.
⁸⁷ Liano, Dante “the Anthropologist with the Old Hat,” in *RMC*, 121.
⁸⁸ Stoll, 1999: 401.
⁸⁹ Smith, 143.
⁹⁰ Stoll, 1996: 50.
⁹¹ Beverley, 2004: vii.
⁹² Skodowska, 2001: 251.
⁹³ Sanford, 38.
⁹⁴ “Against Gerardi and Against Rigoberta: Attacks Are Continually Made to Make them Loose Some of their Luster,” reprinted in *RMC*, 107.
⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 108.
⁹⁶ Menchú, 103.
⁹⁷ Spivak, 1999.
⁹⁸ Menchú, 1983: 1.
⁹⁹ Stoll, Interview with D. Ramirez, 119.
¹⁰⁰ Menchú, Interview with Juan Jesus Aznares, 113.
¹⁰¹ Stoll, 1999: 200-1.
¹⁰² Beverley, 1989: 22.
¹⁰³ Beverley, 2004: 42.
¹⁰⁴ Subrino, 180; as quoted in Craft, 116.
¹⁰⁵ Izziray, 55, emphasis mine.
¹⁰⁶ Yudice, 16.
¹⁰⁷ As qtd. in Beverley, 2004: xii.
¹⁰⁸ *Dictionary of Word Origins*, Random House, 1998.
¹⁰⁹ Beverley, 2004: 30-31.
¹¹⁰ La Rosa, 1995: 11.
¹¹¹ Yúdice, 15.
¹¹² Beverley and Zimmerman, 1989: 23.
¹¹³ Raul Quintanilla, as qtd. in Beverley and Zimmerman, 1989: 36.
¹¹⁴ Daniel Ortega, *ibid*.
¹¹⁵ Taylor, 30
¹¹⁶ As qtd. in Yudice, 15.
¹¹⁷ Sklodowska, 2001: 252.
¹¹⁸ Lyotard, 1988: 24.
¹¹⁹ Beach, i.
¹²⁰ Nietzsche, 295.
¹²¹ *Ibid*, 295.
¹²² *Ibid*, 406.

¹²³ See Mark Sanders, "A review of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*." In Postcolonial Reading, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999.

¹²⁴ Spivak, 1999: 211.

¹²⁵ Skledowska, 198.

¹²⁶ Nietzsche, 295.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 407.

¹²⁸ Mary Louse Pratt, *RMC*, 46.

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