

DEALING WITH ACADEMIC CONFLICTS IN THE CLASSROOM: *I, RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ AS A CASE STUDY*

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Writing in 1999, the American anthropologist David Stoll challenged several important elements in Guatemalan Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, a text assigned in courses in many disciplines in American colleges.¹ The controversy Stoll sparked encouraged a number of instructors to drop *I, Rigoberta Menchú* from their reading lists. Yet it is the controversial nature of this work which makes it suitable for my 150-student introductory course, "The World Since 1945," which meets a "cultural diversity" requirement for students at all class levels. My goal in assigning a troubling and troubled text such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in this course is to open up a dialogue. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* questions students, while encouraging them to pose and answer new questions, taking them to places where supporters and critics of the text (including the instructor) might never have gone.

In order to provide a context for students reading *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, I begin with a lecture on Guatemala in the twentieth century. I want students to relate the historical narrative I present, in which the 1954 coup is a central event, to Menchú's historical narrative, in which both the coup and the United States are largely absent. (This is not a course in Central American history in which students' immersion in the subject would allow them to explore in greater depth the context in which Menchú lived and wrote.) I divide the readings into three parts. First I have students read *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, without introducing Stoll's analyses, because I want students to develop their own readings of her text. Then we turn to Stoll's study and the debate it has generated, and conclude with passages from Menchú's later *Crossing Borders*.

Stoll's *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* is a clear, well-written text that in some courses would be an excellent book to assign and discuss critically. However, the essence of his critique and responses to it can be presented through lectures and selected readings from Stoll and his respondents.² From research

¹Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, ed., Elisabeth Burgos-Debray; trans. Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1984). All references to this text are given as *IRM* followed by the page number. On teaching *I, Rigoberta Menchú* before Stoll's critique, see Allen Carey-Webb and Stephen Benz, eds., *Teaching and Testimony: Rigoberta Menchú and the North American Classroom* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

²David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999). For discussions of Stoll's work, see "If Truth Be Told: A Forum on David Stoll's 'Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans'," *Latin American Perspectives* 26 (November 1999), 5-88; "The Menchú Controversy: The Nature and Politics of Truth and Representation in the Postmodern Era," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 13 (2000): 103-162; Arturo Arias, ed., *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); and (continued...)

in archives on land disputes in Menchú's community and from interviews with a number of individuals who knew Menchú and her community during the period covered by her memoir, Stoll argues that there are several major errors in her account. For example, Stoll contends that the land dispute that consumed Menchú's father, Vicente Menchú, was with his in-laws rather than with *ladinos*, members of the racial elite of European and Indian origin who identify with their European ancestry; that Menchú might not have worked as a seasonal laborer on plantations as a child; that she attended a Catholic school through seventh grade and therefore learned Spanish earlier than she says in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*; and that guerrilla forces committed acts of violence in her community. Stoll therefore contests the nature and chronology of the political engagement of Menchú and her parents presented in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.³

It is important for students to understand that Stoll has a political agenda, but that this does not mean that he is wrong. This contention sparks resistance from students who have been taught to look for and value signs in a text of an apparently apolitical objectivity. Yes, I argue, political commitment can interfere with historical investigation, but it might also be necessary in order to pose certain questions and to pursue answers to them. Stoll believes that indigenous peoples in Guatemala saw themselves caught between the army and the guerrilla forces, a conflict that perpetuated the intra-*ladino* conflict of 1954. Although Stoll recognizes that the army was responsible for more than ninety per cent of the killings in the fighting in Guatemala in the decades after the coup, he blames the guerrillas for misleading indigenous groups and making them targets for the army. Stoll believe that Menchú misrepresents indigenous people's politics by depicting elements of her life experience and that of her family inaccurately in order to convince a West European and North American audience that she was the voice of the indigenous rural poor in Guatemala and that their

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"Conditions, contexts and controversies of truth-making: Rigoberta Menchú and the perils of everyday witnessing and testimonial work," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16 (May-June 2003): 275-375.

³For good critiques of Stoll's research, see Nelly P. Stromquist, "On truth, voice, and qualitative research," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 13 (2000): 139-152; and Dorothy E. Smith, "Rigoberta Menchú and David Stoll: contending stories," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16 (May-June 2003): 287-305. To go beyond such appraisals, one needs to look at Stoll's fixations, such as the cause of the fire in the Spanish embassy in which Menchú's father died. Stoll is puzzled by his daughter's failure in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* to take the politically expedient position of expressing no doubts that the Guatemalan military was responsible for the fire. But this suggests that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is not as simple as the guerrilla tract Stoll makes it out to be. It might also offer a key to the story Menchú tells in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* of the army executing her brother by burning him to death, an account that Stoll disputes. Is this Menchú's halting effort to speak of the unspeakable, her father's death, in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*?

experience led them to support the guerrillas.⁴ In other words, the “I” of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is a politically conceived collectivity. While Menchú and a number of scholars have addressed particular points Stoll raises, the preponderant response of academics has been that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is a *testimonio*, a deeply political literary genre in which the experiences of a number of people (indigenous peasants in this case) could be presented in the life of one individual. In this reading, Rigoberta Menchú is not the *witness* of events, but *witnessing* for a struggle, in the way that some of my students speak of witnessing for Christ. In sum, Stoll’s critique and the academic rejoinder has been to see Menchú as a political or sociological “we.” My aim is to encourage students to use Stoll’s research to problematize his reading of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and to make the “I” of the title not a site of moral accusation, but a new tool of interpretation.

Stoll and several experts in Arturo Arias’s *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* contend that the guerrilla groups were fundamentally *ladino* movements with the goal of pursuing a radical modernizing agenda that saw Mayan culture as an impediment to recruitment and organization of indigenous peoples. Stoll reads Menchú’s text as an effort to show West Europeans and North Americans that Mayans were attracted to the guerrilla insurgency. However, I think students are also right to read Menchú’s lengthy account of indigenous cultural practices as a message to the guerrillas that, if Mayans joined the insurgency, it was to protect their culture from modernizing projects as well as evidence that native ways did not preclude political action. Menchú’s rejection of Catholic Action—what Stoll terms a “modernization vehicle”—and her espousal of Liberation Theology—a contested reading of Catholic doctrine—suggest that she could also question other organizations and orthodoxies.⁵ Her critique of guerrilla organizations in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is damning: “I’ve come up against revolutionary *companeros, companeros* who had many ideas about making a revolution, but who had trouble accepting that a woman could participate in the struggle not only in superficial things but in fundamental things” (*IRM*, 221).

I, Rigoberta Menchú is a text of self-questioning as well. Menchú tells us that her indigenous community is as wary of her as Stoll is. Her participation in guerrilla movements separated her from her culture: “The community is very suspicious of a woman like me who is twenty-three but they don’t know where I’ve been or where I’ve lived” (*IRM*, 61). Stoll contends that West Europeans and North Americans found

⁴Stoll believes that European and North American radicals listened to Menchú because her argument was one they wanted to hear. Reading *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in the United States in 2003, students asked whether American expectations of welcoming crowds in liberated Baghdad were based on a similar type of reading of selected indigenous sources.

⁵Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú*, 90. Catholic Action was a movement to train Mayans to be catechists. Liberation Theology reads the Bible to say that if the poor are Christ’s children, then confronting the forces that make them poor and oppressed is doing Christ’s work. Pope John Paul II condemned Liberation Theology in 1979.

Menchú appealing as a “pure” indigenous individual. But Menchú herself suggests that she risked any such indigenous “purity” in making the political commitments she believed necessary to save her community. In the context of a course directing students’ attention to “cultural diversity,” the “I” of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* emerges at the heart of the complexities and contradictions of multicultural politics and education. Taken together, Menchú’s and Stoll’s texts bring to the fore the contesting interpretations of multiculturalism with which students grapple all semester: that national societies are composed of separate cultural communities or that individuals are located at intersections of multiple cultural identities. To assess Menchú’s project critically, students enter into dialogue with her text as she does with Catholicism and revolutionary theory, neither of which have her professed aim of protecting and nurturing her indigenous cultural community.

This brings students back to the appearance of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* on syllabi today. I find students quite open to interpreting the nature and content of their education in historical terms.⁶ Like all political texts, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* initially sought to win readers’ support in a particular historical context. If, as Stoll argues, Menchú intended *I, Rigoberta Menchú* to garner support for a guerrilla insurgency that ended some time ago, what is its place in the cultural politics of today’s classrooms in the United States? After all, as feminist sociologist Dorothy E. Smith reminds us, “Menchú’s story was not written for what it has become, a resource for faculty teaching humanities and social sciences with a multicultural orientation in American universities.”⁷ Menchú’s text is appealing to proponents of contemporary Western ideologies such as feminism and socialism, but the fact that her ideas do not always fit well with what is conveyed by these terms in Western political thought enables students to reconsider these ideologies as sites of unfulfilled desires. Do feminists and socialists seek to “rewrite” Menchú’s text to make her a feminist or socialist as they understand these terms in the way that Stoll argues Menchú rewrote her life to make her experience fit a guerrilla narrative? For Stoll’s argument is that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is a guerrilla tract. Stoll assumes readers read it as he thinks it was intended to be read and then he critiques readers for accepting Menchú’s call for guerrilla insurrection. But literary scholar John Beverly, a pioneer in the study of *testimonios*, is correct that most readers

⁶I begin the course with a lecture on the history of the continuous creation, dismantling, and recreation of graduation requirements at UNC and outline the particular political economy of pedagogy in which high enrollments in required courses are the currency that departments present to acquire new faculty hiring lines. I then draw on research in syllabi for the course on post-1945 world history at UNC from its origins, when one goal was to explain to students the sacrifices necessary to pursue the Cold War (like Western Civilization courses following American intervention in World War I), through the post-Cold War integration of mandates to teach the world in light of the American ideologies of multiculturalism and globalization.

⁷Smith, “Rigoberta Menchú and David Stoll,” 289.

now interpret *I, Rigoberta Menchú* as a plea for an end to violence and for the preservation of Mayan culture.⁸ Consideration of this debate allows students to explore the importance for historians of situating not only when and why a text was written, but when and why a text is read.

I, Rigoberta Menchú and the conflicts to which it has given rise are crucial for helping us understand the complexities of identity, identity politics, and multiculturalism in both Guatemala and the United States. To do so, we must recover the individual voice of Rigoberta Menchú and see its hesitations and conflicts as a source. Instructors in the United States assign and students read texts such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* because they see them as "representative" of an "other," and they shy away from analyzing figures such as Menchú as individuals for fear of losing this representivity. We want Menchú to be representative, even while chastising her for not portraying the individuality of her experience. But it is precisely Menchú's individual narrative with its confluences and mistellings that addresses major historical problems of identity—the reason why most American students who read *I, Rigoberta Menchú* outside of Latin American history courses do so now.

Why, students ask, typically in late night e-mail messages, read something that the instructor knows might contain untruths? I am glad they ask and have forwarded samples (rendered anonymous) to the whole class. After voicing their frustration, many students come up with an answer. Having encountered therapy either as clients or students, they see that they might come to understand better the experience of war and repression in Guatemala from identification and analysis of what generates contradictions and absent presences in a text drawn from interviews with a woman about their age. Of course, there is a danger in assuming that American students' psychological insights and perspectives are appropriate tools for interpreting the narrative of an individual from another culture. But, students agree, as long as they are likely to pursue this strategy, it is important that they recognize this is what they are doing. And, in turn, this offers students the possibility of later assessing whether their external perspectives open up the text or deny it coherence and cultural integrity.

Beverly suggests a reading of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* as an Oedipal *bildungsroman*, in which Mendú identifies with her father, then, after his death, with her mother, and finally, after her death, emerges as a woman on her own in telling her story.⁹ There is unquestionably a therapeutic element to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Menchú's nightly

⁸John Beverly, "What Happens When the Subaltern Speaks" in Arias, *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, 224.

⁹John Beverly, "The Real Thing" in Georg M. Gugelberger, ed., *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 268. Menchú situates this independence in chapter XIII, the pivotal chapter in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*: when Menchú was about twelve, her friend María's death from pesticide poisoning led her to resolve that she would learn Spanish, against her father's wishes, and that she would not get married, thus renouncing her mother's identity (*IRM*, 87–90).

awakenings with memories of her horrors in Guatemala ended only when she told her story to the Franco-Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, who later cut-and-pasted the interviews to construct *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (*IRM*, xv). Menchú's political position emerges from her relationship to her parents. She was deeply attached to her father ("If anything was wrong, if my stomach ached, I'd go to him rather than to my mother" [*IRM*, 193, 211]), and she was in turn her father's favorite (*IRM*, 30, 84). Menchú became a catechist like her father and accompanied him on his political work. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is constructed to honor him in his life and death. The distortions Stoll sees in Menchú's account are explicable in terms of her effort to create a heroic narrative in which his death takes on meaning and he continues to live in a project she works to fulfill. But the narrative that celebrated her father marginalizes her mother: "It isn't that I didn't love my mother, but I felt slightly more love for my father" (*IRM*, 210, 211). She adds that "My mother taught many people many things, but I didn't learn as much from her as I should have learned" (*IRM*, 219).¹⁰

Stoll shows that Menchú went to school and learned elements of Spanish at a much younger age than she admits in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. But when students reread her text with this in mind, her father's repeated affirmations that he does not want his children to go to school because this will take away their indigenous culture (*IRM*, 169, 190) and the leitmotif of the moral degradation of "ladinized Indians" who use their knowledge of Spanish to exploit other Indians (*IRM*, 22, 24, 37) take on a new meaning.¹¹ Menchú recognizes that Indians like her who have tasted the apple have used their knowledge and experience to oppress their fellow Indians, not to save Eden or to expel the snake. It is not surprising that schooling in the oppressors' language evokes denial in Menchú's text. Stoll's account of Menchú's support for guerrillas whose activities bring violence upon the Indians is a retelling of the accounts of "ladinized Indians" who hurt their communities at the heart of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. If this conflict informs *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, a text about coming to terms with the death of her father in a fire in the Spanish embassy, it also seeks to resolve it. The historical narrative of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* begins with the arrival of the Spaniards more than four hundred years earlier, but the fact that Vicente Menchú goes to the Spanish embassy in an effort to resolve grievances

¹⁰Early in the course, students analyze several accounts of the memory of the Holocaust, including Tzvetan Todorov's *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996). Todorov's analysis leads students to see Menchú's mother in terms of his idea of a feminine-coded "ordinary virtue," undervalued and difficult to transmit in traditional Western genres, and her father in terms of a male-coded "heroic virtue." According to Todorov, heroic virtue is presented in epic narratives and this underlies the way Menchú tells her father's story in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

¹¹Discussion of this element of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* has prompted a few first-generation college students to talk to me individually of parents who promoted their children's achievement, but feared its effects. These students spoke of understanding this aspect of Menchú's account. And this in turn helped me to understand her text better.

apparently irresolvable in contemporary Guatemala brings closure to this narrative (*IRM*, 186). The revelation of the good and the bad sides of the political cultures that speak Spanish in the late twentieth-century, that of the Spanish state and of the Guatemalan army, will allow Menchú to come to terms with her Mayan identity, to become a representative for Mayans who seek to preserve the diversity, but overcome the divisions, among Mayans by using Spanish as a shared language.

Stoll sees Menchú shaping her autobiography to fit the ideology of her guerrilla organization. But I ask students to consider whether Menchú is in as much control of her story as Stoll suggests. At a minimum, Menchú evokes a feeling of disorientation that exposure to Catholicism and travel created: "I was very ashamed at being so confused [over the morality of political violence], when so many of my village understood so much better than I. But their ideas were very pure because they had never been outside their community" (*IRM*, 121). Menchú can be seen responding not solely to ideologies or even constituencies, but to her own fears and doubts. This does not diminish Menchú or her text. It reveals the difficulties at the heart of any multicultural dialogue, difficulties that cultures face collectively, but which Menchú has presented in her individual narrative. She produces a multicultural *testimonio* not (solely) as a political project, but because she embodies several cultural experiences. This becomes evident when one reads *I, Rigoberta Menchú* in conjunction with Menchú's second memoir, *Crossing Borders*, in which Rigoberta Menchú is no longer the Rigoberta Menchú of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.¹² She comes to see herself as a bridge in Mayan communities between progressive Catholics and indigenous Mayans.

When you cross a border you first affirm your fixed identity to the authority of the other, the border guard,¹³ and then, having crossed, you put yourself into a new environment where your own understanding of your identity is subject to affirmation and questioning. You can emerge with different ideas of who you are and of the societies you have come from and visited. For students in a history class in the United States to read *I, Rigoberta Menchú* critically is to cross such a border. The metaphor of crossing borders informs Menchú's second memoir. Perhaps because Menchú's project in *Crossing Borders* is closer to that of the students, they find it a more accessible text: the "I" of *Crossing Borders* is closer to the "I" American students use.¹⁴

¹²Rigoberta Menchú, *Crossing Borders*, trans. and ed., Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1998). All references to this text are given as *CB* followed by the page number.

¹³In *Crossing Borders*, Menchú relates several accounts of the suspicious questioning given her by immigration authorities when she crosses borders. And this, of course, is one interpretation of Stoll's project of interrogating Menchú.

¹⁴One strategy I have pursued in this course is to teach autobiographic accounts of traumatic adolescences in violent non-Western environments (such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*) in conjunction with
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Menchú situates herself in a world of difference absent from *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Child of a mother rooted in Mayan culture and of a militant catechist father who did not believe in Mayan religion (CB, 213), Menchú develops a confidence in her identity in exile by working for reconciliation of tradition and progress. The Menchú of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* believed she would have to sacrifice at least temporarily those elements of her indigenous identity she associated with her mother—centered around marriage and children—in order to fulfill her father's mission. But in *Crossing Borders*, her goal becomes a wedding of cultures from which both will gain. As she says of the foundation she established after winning the Nobel Prize, it "should combine our own native wisdom and experience with present-day technology" (IRM, 5). In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Western practices are fended off as simply destructive of indigenous ways; in *Crossing Borders*, modern technology is presented as incomplete without a cooperative relationship with indigenous culture. Gone is the Menchú who would not use a mill to grind maize (IRM, xvii); now she "always travels with [her] little computer under [her] arm" (CB, 219). In *Crossing Borders* she is married to a Mayan man and has a child. And she does not limit herself to describing Mayan ways as she did in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. She now speaks very comfortably in the voice of Mayan culture, her mother's voice, suggesting, for instance, to some Mayans "that perhaps Mother Earth needed prayers and offerings" (CB, 61).

I, Rigoberta Menchú is informed by Menchú's relationship with her father. *Crossing Borders* is her account of coming to terms with her mother. It is a book of guilt and penance. "When I recorded the tapes for my book *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, I was still in a state of shock. I was incapable of tackling the subject of my mother." "I will never get over the trauma of having left my mother so shortly before her death." "When my mother was alive I never managed to understand her completely ... Only in the last twelve years have I realized what she was. For me, she is a constant teacher. Every time things go wrong for me, I always ask myself how she would have coped" (CB, 86, 71). Stoll presents Menchú's father's land dispute as a conflict with her mother's family, the

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selections from autobiographic sequels that reveal individuals' experiences and self-analysis in the West (such as *Crossing Borders*). Le Ly Hayslip with Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1989); Le Ly Hayslip with James Hayslip, *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (New York: Doubleday, 1993); and Mark Mathabane, *Kaffir Boy: the true story of a Black youth's coming of age in Apartheid South Africa* (New York: Macmillan, 1986); Mark Mathabane, *Kaffir Boy in America: an encounter with apartheid* (New York: Scribner's, 1989) work well in this context. However, the fact that the initial volumes on life in the non-West were written as autobiographies (not assembled later from interviews) and were written by individuals living in the United States, individuals who had or were given by a co-author a good idea of what an American audience expected from an autobiography, make them different in nature from *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Students explore the expectations they bring to texts in explaining why they find Hayslip's and Mathabane's stories of life in the non-West initially less alien and more enjoyable and satisfying to read than *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

Tums. *Crossing Borders* is about Rigoberta Menchú's rebirth as a Tum. We learn in *Crossing Borders* that Rigoberta Menchú was the name her father had given her when he registered her birth, but she was called M'lim as a child, and did not know of or use the name Rigoberta until she was eighteen; her mother could never pronounce it. In her first memoir she goes by Rigoberta Menchú, the name she began to use as she was attaining a political consciousness associated with her father. In exile she increasingly went by her full name, Rigoberta Menchú Tum.

In *Crossing Borders* Rigoberta Menchú becomes the figure she had wanted her mother to be in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*—the political activist rooted in Mayan culture. Menchú makes constant reference to what is presented as a Mayan worldview of an ultimate harmony in which antagonistic forms of difference coexist: "... the balance that exists in the Mayan memory. It is harmony. Mayans understand well that you cannot have a world that is totally good without having a bad side to it. Negative aspects are offset by good ones" (CB, 22). The secrets Menchú spoke of in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* are clearly associated with her mother in *Crossing Borders*. In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, she had said that Indians in Guatemala are discriminated against because they hide their identity and keep their secrets (IRM, 20). But in *Crossing Borders*, Menchú decides to tell readers one secret by completing a story she had told in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (IRM, 212–213). It concerns her mother, about whom she previously could not easily speak: "The person *Rajaaw juyub*' [the divine Guardian of the World] chooses to appear to must find a way to persuade other people to beg his forgiveness for the damage they have done to the natural world—and to life itself. Or else they must keep the secret that they never talk about" (CB, 89). In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Menchú was too unsure of how her border crossings affected the Mayan community to do more than affirm the existence of secrets, secrets from outsiders and in a different sense from herself. But in *Crossing Borders*, she explains that parents keep certain secrets from their children until they reach maturity. Menchú's parents died as she was becoming an adult, and *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and *Crossing Borders* are accounts of her effort to learn her own secrets and to persuade people to ask forgiveness for the damage they had done. Consideration of such issues allows students to reassess interpretations of the individual and the collective that underscore all debates about Menchú's work,¹⁵ and the place of the individual in discussions of cultural identity and difference. And this is the point as well when the most adventuresome students explore the possibilities and cultural limits of the psychology they might have brought to their interpretations of Menchú.

In *Crossing Borders*, the shift from a *marxisant* Liberation Theology analysis to an identity politics and feminist analysis is embodied in Menchú's new ability to talk of her mother: "My mother is a symbol of women and of indigenous peoples. She

¹⁵Vicente Menchú fought for rights to what he considered his land, property imbricated with cultural practices. In *Crossing Borders*, his daughter considers *I, Rigoberta Menchú* the same way: "My dream is to recover the rights to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*"—rights held by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray (CB, 114).

personified two kinds of discrimination. Women and indigenous peoples have both been mistreated." "[T]he insurgents mistrusted the people [Mayans] who had minds of their own." "The liberation movements ... had no real understanding of the struggles of women and indigenous peoples" (CB, 60, 87, 88). Menchú's critique of guerrilla organizations' relations with women changes from *I, Rigoberta Menchú* to *Crossing Borders*: Guerrilla organizations gave women power, she wrote in the later memoir, but not the right to be themselves. They denied women their identities.¹⁶

Reading Menchú's resolution of personal and collective identity issues in *Crossing Borders* resonates for students facing their own such issues. I find it helpful at this point to address my own conflicted feelings about Menchú's account. My initial reading of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* some twenty years ago shared traits with that of Stoll's generic leftist. As confronting the literature on *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and teaching the text have given me a fuller, more intellectually satisfying understanding of Menchú the historical actor, it is one tinged with a kind of loss I know few of my students—now born about the time *I, Rigoberta Menchú* first appeared in English (1984)—feel. But I want them to see that interpretation goes beyond the thrill of the first time and the disillusionment of second thoughts. Thrill and disillusionment are just the beginning and raise essential questions of readers and of texts.

But what of Stoll? It is important for students to read Stoll in dialogue with Menchú as well. Having learned to ask new questions of a memoir, they are ready to ask them of an academic's work. Stoll presents himself as the protector of indigenous peoples, but he also engages in struggles over protection of his own chosen culture of academic anthropology. A one-time journalist who earned his doctorate in anthropology, Stoll finds critics calling him a journalist untrue to the ways of academic anthropology. He is in the position of Menchú, whose catechist training and beliefs make her affirmations of Mayan culture questionable for some observers.¹⁷ Stoll is now an academic anthropologist who criticizes the practices of many academic anthropologists in the name of defending the community and values of academic anthropology. He crafts elements of the introduction and conclusion of his book to support a right-wing political ideology he has apparently come to see as offering an explanation of the threats to his cultural community of academic anthropology and which he believes offers the power to protect it, although most in that community see this ideology as alien and destructive of their community (as Stoll sees the guerrilla movements Menchú supports to defend her indigenous community as being a threat to the existence of that community). Like the Menchú of *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Stoll

¹⁶In a sign of her confidence in her identity in *Crossing Borders*, Menchú deals with intra-familial (CB, 24–46), intra-Mayan, and intra-indigenous peoples (CB, 3) conflicts absent in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.

¹⁷See, for instance, Duncan Earle, "Menchú Tales and Maya Social Landscapes: The Silencing of Words and Worlds" in Arias, ed., *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, 288–308.

presents himself as someone who will be looked upon with suspicion by elements of the academic anthropology community that he treasures as a consequence of his struggle to save this community from alien elements.

Why ask students to read a disputed text and disputes about the text? If anthropologists want native peoples to be pure, I have worked to get students to explore their similar sentiments about education. Although students might favor the introduction of certain elements of consumer capitalism and electoral democracy into the classroom (such as publication of course evaluation data), they are often initially wary of taking on problematic, unresolved texts, of the very sort they must learn to analyze to navigate these economic and political cultures. And articulation and reception of cultural difference is a contaminating activity. Menchú is correct that it involves secrets that no telling or mistelling can fully reveal.¹⁸ I suggest that we interpret *I, Rigoberta Menchú* like the chocolate the mysterious daughter of a French father and a Guatemalan Indian mother offers inhabitants of a small French village in Lasse Halström's film *Chocolat*: It teaches new things to villagers that even the disappearance of the woman we thought we knew will not take away.

¹⁸“It is the degree of our foreignness, our cultural difference, that would make [Menchú's] secrets incomprehensible to the outsider. We could never know them as she does, because we would inevitably force her secrets into our framework.” Doris Sommer, “Las Casa's Lie and Other Language Games” in Arias, ed., *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, 246.