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Rebecca Anderson

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I, the unreliable, Rigoberta Menchu

There have been many discrepancies regarding the credibility of the book *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. In the so-called “autobiography” Menchu describes the mass destruction, misery, violence, and oppression towards the indigenous Guatemalan people during the Guatemalan civil war. However, according to research done by anthropologist David Stoll, there is an abundance of inconsistencies and exaggerations in this story. Due to the potential that there are skewed facts and false accounts, this book should not be entered into evidence for the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Health (GCHH). Menchu’s book contains very questionable truths not only about the book’s facts, but about Rigoberta herself.

The Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) was established in 1994 to “clarify with objectivity, equity and impartiality, the human rights violations and acts of violence connected with the armed confrontation that caused suffering among the Guatemalan people” (CEH). This Commission’s mission was to provide answers to questions that have plagued Guatemalan people ever since the war. For the Commission to fulfill their mandate, it must use records that are able to validate the historical atrocities that took place during the civil war. Menchu’s book would not be a good piece of evidence for the Commission because the book not only has questionable historical factuality, but Menchu herself has questionable credibility as an author.

Rigoberta Menchu's book received numerous questions regarding her own credibility. Menchu portrays herself as an illiterate peasant who spent her early years helping with plantation work both on the family farm or on the Pacific coast in abusive conditions. According to her writing, she "never went to school, and so I find speaking Spanish very difficult" (Menchu,1). However, this statement is inconsistent with Stoll's research. Stoll discovered that Menchu had attended the Belgian-Guatemalan Institute and completed the equivalent of a seventh grade education (Rohter). According to Rosa Menchu, Rigoberta's half-sister, Rigoberta was "singled out for special treatment because Belgian nuns who were friends of the family thought her unusually bright and promising" (Rohter). Menchu states in the very first page of her book that she "only learned Spanish three years ago" (Menchu,1) but Rosa and Nicolas Menchu recall their little sister correcting their feeble attempts at Spanish and "proudly showing off her ability to read and write when she visited home on vacation from boarding school" (Rohter).

This rewrite of her background, Stoll said, fits into a pattern of distortions in the rest of the book that aimed to "drastically revise the prewar experience of her village to suit the needs of the revolutionary organization she had joined" (Rohter). According to Stoll, Rigoberta Menchu's book was "written for propaganda to promote her particular cause and point of view" (Walford). Menchu's questionable motive for writing her story potentially even led to some other exaggerations that further discredited her reliability. According to Stoll, it is crucial for readers, including the CEH "to distinguish between..what is probable and what is highly improbable." Many of the events writes of seem highly improbable when a reader considers the accounts given from family members and Stoll's research overall. The sum of the embellishments and the uncertain motive undermines Menchu's self-image.

“I, Rigoberta Menchu” aims to tell the story of Rigoberta and her entire family being forced into extreme poverty and exploitation due to their Indian blood, and absence of education. By the end of Menchu’s book, her entire family is either brutally killed or driven away by Guatemalan security forces. Stoll states in his rebuttal to Menchu’s testimony that at many critical points in the story, Menchu’s book “is not the eyewitness account that it purports to be” (Stoll, 70). He goes on to support his thesis with multiple examples of what he calls “inexactitudes” and “unreliab[ility]” (Stoll). By doing this, Stoll is presenting issues that have the ability to diminish Menchu’s credibility and influence. An example from Menchu’s writing that constitutes as “unreliable” to Stoll is the story Menchu tells of her family’s long struggle with greedy *ladinos* (Guatemalans of European or mixed-race descent) for possession of land. However, Stoll’s reports suggest that the land dispute was really only a part of a long-standing family feud involving Menchu’s father and his in-laws. Even close relatives, like Rosa Menchu, remember the situation very differently. According to them, Vicente Menchu Perez, Rigoberta’s father, was disputing with Antonia Tum Castro, his wife’s uncle, and his sons (Rohter).

Menchu also wrote about her own eyewitness account of the deaths of two of her brothers, which was again rebutted by Stoll. He offered evidence showing that Menchu had not witnessed her brothers’ deaths and had portrayed those deaths inaccurately. While Stoll was interviewing locals near Menchu’s village of Chimal about their experiences during the civil war he mentioned one of the most horrific events in Menchu’s novel. In this part of the book, Menchu tells of a group of prisoners, including Rigoberta’s brother Petrocinio, being burned alive by soldiers in front of other locals, including Rigoberta herself. Residents and family members expressed “doubts about Ms. Menchu’s account of the death of [her] brother Petrocinio” and said “Around here, nobody was ever burned alive that way” (Rohter). The

questionable facts of these events not only undercuts the emotional impact of Menchu's story, but yet again brings to light the ambiguous credibility of Menchu.

When Menchu was faced with Stoll's accusations, she gave "ambiguous, contradictory explanations." (Strauss). In an article done by the *New York Times* in December of 1999 Menchu said "I don't deny or contradict what is said in books about me" (Rohter). However, in an interview done that following February, Menchu stated: "the book that is being questioned is a testimonial that mixes my personal testimony and the testimony of what happened in Guatemala...the book being questioned is not my autobiography" (Strauss) At the end of the book, Menchu tells us clearly that she withheld some information, saying: "I'm still keeping secret what I think no-one should know" (Menchu, 289) Doris Sommer explains this statement by saying "Even the most sympathetic reader cannot know the whole truth." (Sommer, 33). The considerable amount of minor and major exaggerations in Menchu's story leaves reasonable doubt that her accounts of events may not have actually occurred, and the CEH would be unable to use her book as a viable source of evidence.

Although many examples have been brought up against Menchu's credibility, Menchu supporters claim that final authorship of the book was not in control of Menchu. According to Menchu and her advocates, she has tried to distance herself from any proclaimed errors in her book by saying any problems "are the responsibility of Elisabeth Burgos" whom interviewed Ms. Menchu (Rohter). Burgos is the Venezuelan anthropologist who, after interviewing Menchu, transcribed the tapes in a way that "nothing was left out, not a word, even if it was used incorrectly or was later changed." (Menchu, xxi). At an interview conducted in September of 1998, Menchu described her current relationship with Burgos "nonexistent because of a disagreement over publishing royalties" (Rohter). "I am the protagonist of the book...but I am

not the author” Menchu affirmed, a statement that aims to show the disgruntled relationship between her and Burgos (qtd in Rohter). However, Burgos claims that “every phrase in the book comes from what Rigoberta Menchu said on the tapes” even offering to make available the original recordings for other researchers (qtd in Rohter). In the introduction of “I, Rigoberta Menchu” Burgos states that she could not cut out certain parts “simply out of respect for Rigoberta.” (Menchu, xxiii). These two quotes from Burgos emphasize that any historical errors made in the book were originally created and maintained by Menchu. This claim is supported in, “Crossing Borders” which was published by Menchu in the spring of 1998. In the book Menchu asserts that she “censored various parts that seemed imprudent to me...I removed the parts that referred to our village, a lot of detail about my brothers” (qtd in Rohter) An important note is that the errors still remained in the book even after the editing was done. As Doris Somer explains, these remaining errors say that “either the informant, the scribe, or both were determined to keep a series of admonitions in the published text. The refusals say, in effect, that this document is a screen...something that shows and also covers up” (Somer). Regardless of where the errors came from, the factual errors could present a problem for the CEH if they were to use “I, Rigoberta Menchu” in a judicial setting.

An argument used by many Menchu supporters claim that westerners, including Stoll, simply do not understand the *testimonio* genre under which Menchu’s book falls into. According to John Beverly, “Testimony does not produce or reflect historical data” (qtd in Arias,76). Thus, a testimonial is written to provide true effect, not to be provide historical truth. One of Menchu’s opening statements in her book implies that she never meant for her story to be considered an autobiography, she says “This is my testimony...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” (Menchu, 1). Arias, a Menchu supporter,

writes “*Testimonio* was never meant to be an autobiography or a sworn testimony in the juridical sense; rather, it is a collective communal account of a person’s life” (Arias, 76). According to Lynn Walford, the importance of testimony does not “lie..in its factual accuracy [but] in its far-reaching effects” (Walford). If “I, Rigoberta Menchu” was written in a genre that in itself has no obligation to “reflect historical data” then it would be unreasonable for it to be used as a record that should be “able to validate the historical atrocities that took place during the civil war” (CEH).

On the first page of her book, Menchu says “My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people” (Menchu,1). Claiming to be able to represent “all poor Guatemalans” requires “simplifying the guerillas into unambiguous images for the solidarity groups to identify with” (Haley,93). According to Haley, the mobilization against the Guatemalan Army that came from Menchu’s story “became dysfunctional for those Mayan peasants whose stories were not equally privileged” (Haley, 92). Menchu’s statement on the first page of her book furthered the already prevalent European and North American “tendency to idolize native voices that serve our own political and moral needs, as opposed to others that do not” (qtd in Haley, 92). The diversity among Guatemalan peasants’ interests, leads to some groups becoming misrepresented and harmed from Menchu’s amplified voice. If Menchu’s representation of “all poor Guatemalans” was to be included in the CEH records, it could drown out voices of other Guatemalan peasants or indigenous groups who have different beliefs regarding the Guatemalan civil war.

“I, Rigoberta Menchu” presents factual errors, misrepresentations, and questionable credibility regarding Menchu. In a scholarship presented by anthropologist David Stoll, Menchu’s book contains historical inaccuracies, and inconsistencies. Although Menchu

supporters say that errors may have stemmed from transcriber Burgos, the errors remain and present reasonable doubt of any claims made in the book. Menchu's book not only contains falsified stories, but presents some questionable truths regarding Menchu's own self-representation. Since the GCHH aims to use reports that are historically valid, they would not be able to "validate the historical atrocities" by using Menchu's book.

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Sommer, Doris. "Rigoberta's Secret." *Latin American Perspectives* 18.3 (1991): 32. *Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File*. Web. 30 Oct. 2015.

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Walford, Lynn. "Truth, Lies, And Politics In The Debate Over Testimonial Writing: The Cases Of Rigoberta Menchu And Binjamin Wilkomirski." *The Comparatist* (2006): 113. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 29 Oct. 2015.

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Rohter, Larry. "TARNISHED LAUREATE: A Special Report.; Nobel Winner Finds Her Story Challenged." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 14 Dec. 1998. Web. 29 Oct. 2015.

Rohter in this article discusses many of Stoll's arguments against "I, Rigoberta Menchu's" historical reliability. Rohter conducted his own research by taking interviews himself, and drawing interviews from other sources. His research supports Stoll's and

throughout the article he draws on external and primary sources to suggest that Menchu's book is exaggerated and Menchu herself has questionable credibility.

Many of Rohter's points were well-supported, as he drew from external sources, personal research, interviews of Menchu, and Stoll's writing. I used much of his article because I found it to be very applicable to my claims. Rohter's writing was well-organized and easy to follow, unlike many other articles I found.

Sommer, Doris. "Rigoberta's Secret." *Latin American Perspectives* 18.3 (1991): 32. Web. 30 Oct. 2015.

Sommer begins by talking about how Menchu stated in her book that she would withhold information, and how that affects her credibility. As she is discussing Menchu's statements she brings up the changes Menchu may have gone through before she gave her testimony that could have affected her view of what happened in her past. She goes on to analyze rhetorical tactics Menchu used in her book, and discusses the criteria of the "testimony" genre.

The first few pages of Sommer's article gave me many good arguments and claims to use as supporting evidence. I used Sommer's article to reinforce points I made about Menchu's reliability as a credible author, and disagreements about the origin of factual errors in the book. I did not use any of the Sommer's information on the rhetorical tactics, because her writing was extremely intellectual and did not seem necessary to prove my already-listed points.

Strauss, Robert. "Truth and Consequences." *Stanford Magazine*. Stanford Alumni, May-June 1999. Web. 29 Oct. 2015.

Strauss writes about Stoll's report and the turmoil it caused among universities, writers, and the general public. Throughout the article Strauss brings forth the various points discounting Menchu's credibility via direct quotes from Stoll's scholarship. After explaining some of the main claims Stoll made, Strauss writes about the effect this controversy has had on schools that once used Menchu's book as required reading, but explains that there is still significance to Menchu's book.

I found Strauss's article very helpful while writing this paper. His article served a similar purpose to Rohter's, but addressed other points. I was able to use a majority of this article in my writing, as it explained and supporting many of the points I aimed to reinforce. The writing was clear and plainly written. This allowed me to focus more on the content instead of trying to decipher what Strauss was trying to say, as I had to do in other more scholarly writings.

Walford, Lynn. "Truth, Lies, And Politics In The Debate Over Testimonial Writing: The Cases Of Rigoberta Menchu And Benjamin Wilkomirski." *The Comparatist* (2006): 113. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 29 Oct. 2015.

In this article Walford compares the controversy that occurred when Menchu and Wilkomirski works were exposed as frauds. Lynn at first gave brief overviews of both works, and then went on to analyze specific arguments against each piece of literature. Walford also dedicates sections explaining the importance a genre plays in writing, and the truth expected of each.

I used this article to better help myself understand the *testimonio* genre, and what should be expected of testimonial writing. Walford explained a testimonios purpose which helped me

with my testimonial paragraph. Along with an explanation of testimonios, Walford provided more information on Stoll's research that gave me more insight into other claims made by Stoll.

Commentary

_____ I was fairly confident in my first draft, and believed that there would be minor editing involved in the submission of my final copy. While working I noted some things that I could disinclude, because they were not crucial to the paper and I did not need the extra length. After meeting with you I was also able to focus on some weaker paragraphs and topics to strengthen them individually. I also added in sentences between paragraphs for better transitions and overall flow of the paper. Many quotes needed explanation, so I went back and tried to further elaborate

on any “floating” quotes. I sometimes find that it is more difficult to better the flow of my paper after a final draft edit, because there are so many new ideas that arise during the revision process. Thankfully, I felt I was able to successfully tie the paragraphs together and wrap up the paper to the best of my ability.