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### Communicating "Truth": Testimonio, Vernacular Voices, and The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy

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## COMMUNICATING “TRUTH”: *TESTIMONIO*, VERNACULAR VOICES, AND THE RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ CONTROVERSY

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*In this essay, the authors explore some of the communicative dimensions of the Rigoberta Menchú controversy, engaging both the textual and contextual elements of this controversy. They first provide a brief review of the Menchú case and an analysis of the criticism by her principal detractor, David Stoll. The authors then analyze the unique role that testimonio plays in Latin American discursive constructions, as well as how other discursive communities responded to the Menchú-Stoll controversy. Finally, the authors comment on the discursive importance of the Menchú-Stoll controversy, and make a case for the heuristic value of testimonio in future investigations of Latin American work in communication studies.*

What *testimonio* obliges us to confront is not only the subaltern as a (self-)represented victim, but also as the agent—in that very act of representation—of a transformative project that aspires to become hegemonic in its own right. (Beverly, 2005, p. 553)

When political activist and Nobel Peace laureate Rigoberta Menchú announced her decision to run for the presidency of Guatemala in 2007, she reopened a looming debate and reignited a controversy. Although she

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is a famed author, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and peace activist, it seems that controversy regarding her book (1983's *I, Rigoberta Menchú*) continues to follow her. One journalist noted how she remains a key political figure in Guatemala but that she would surely face an uphill battle in the campaign due to the fact that she is seen by many there as a "polarizing figure" (Tobar, 2007, p. A17). In another example of some of these challenges, after her public appearance at the 2006 PeaceJam in Denver, Colorado, a *Rocky Mountain News* editorial called her an "outright phony . . ." (Carroll, 2006, p. 46A).

Menchú's reputation and the controversy that shadows her originate from her autobiography *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) which she wrote with the help of anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos (or Burgos-Debray). The Menchú biography was first printed in French and Spanish, but not long after the book was translated into dozens of other languages. Her book quickly became a cipher for indigenous activism; her stories of oppressed Mayans and *Ladinos* were viewed as the type of eyewitness accounts that would help bring justice and peace to Latin American nations. Menchú's supporters treated her work as an example of writing that represented the personal and collective struggles of indigenous groups in Latin America, and her story—which is often characterized as a form of Latin American "testimonio" (testimony or testimonial)—was hailed as an illustration of how authors who had witnessed violence were "authorized to speak truth to power" (Gilmore, 2003, p. 700).

The Menchú *testimonio* (see Arias, 2001b; Beverley, 2005; Gilmore 2003; Gugelberger, 1995, 1999; Sanford, 1999; Sommer, 1991) supposedly resonated with "leftist" national and international audiences because it provided an autobiographical indictment of the Guatemalan government's treatment of local indigenous communities. Between the 1960s and 1980s, hundreds of villages were burned and hundreds of thousands of people were either killed or driven into refuge, and the "Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico" (Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), or truth commission) had determined that some of these actions were parts of strategically planned policies on the part of the military (CEH, 1999; Sanford, 1999). The difficulty, of course, was deciding on the culpability of the social actors involved in these tragedies—was this an instance of state terror, or were the government forces simply trying to end the violence on the part of the guerrillas?

By the late 1980s, Menchú's book was quoted by human rights activists, readers from the French left, and other critics of the West. For almost two decades, millions of scholars and laypersons were reading her book, and this work was eventually considered to be so important that it became required reading on many college campuses (Garcia, 1997; Rohter, 1998).

Menchú's fame became so widespread thereafter that she was nominated for and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, and she emerged as an exemplar for those who wanted to see more feminist activism, empowered autobiographical texts, and counter-histories in Guatemalan affairs.

Yet not everyone was interested in valorizing Menchú's efforts. In 1998, the accuracy of Menchú's autobiographical accounts were severely challenged by anthropologists David Stoll (1998, 1999) and others like *New York Times* correspondent Larry Rohter (1998), accusing her of stretching the truth in her autobiography. These critics of Menchú argued that her autobiography was an inaccurate representation of historical and contemporary facts in Latin America, and they complained about both the style and content of her work. Menchú's edited autobiography was further labeled a "hoax" that had been produced by Guatemalan guerrillas, an untruthful document that was based on a "classic Marxist myth" (Horowitz, 1999, p. 1; McLaren and Pinkney-Pastrana, 2000, p. 168). Another review went so far as to claim that she was "a thief," "an illegitimate child," and a "bitter" author (Stoll, 1998, pp. 25–32, p. 104; Sanford, 1999, p. 39). Likewise, her detractors also argued that the audiences who accepted her claims were being taken in by leftists and foreign supporters.

Yet, even as they disagreed about the veracity of the book, scholars around the world soon recognized the symbolic value of this work (Arias, 2002, 2000a, 2000b; Menchú & Burgos-Debray, 1983; Carey-Webb & Benz, 1996; Kempen, 2001; Schulze, 1997; Silverstone & Bunch, 1999; Stoll, 1993, 1999, 2002; Zimmerman, 1995).<sup>1</sup> What began as an academic enterprise that documented post-colonial conditions in Guatemala, turned into an international debate about the truthfulness of Menchú's claims, the role of various military organizations in the region, and North American counter-revolutionary involvement in Guatemalan affairs. In the immediate aftermath, some publicly dismissed her work while many came to her defense and used this controversy to reevaluate traditions of knowledge production in general.

In this essay, we reopen the debate in communication studies on the Rigoberta Menchú controversy, which began with Delgado's (1999) articulation of the Menchú case to rhetorical theory, and we continue exploring the discursive dynamics surrounding the rise of and recent challenge to Rigoberta Menchú as a Latin American icon and a symbol for indigenous activism. Whereas other scholarly work in this area has emphasized the English-language discourse in this case alone, we actively integrate Spanish language and other "vernacular" commentaries for a more complete representation of this debate. Here we join those communication scholars who are interested in integrating vernacular voices of those who participate in salient social discussions (e.g., Hasian & Delgado, 1998; Ono & Sloop, 1995, 2002), as well as scholars who are interested in

giving voice to “the other” (e.g., Flores, 1996; Orbe & Strother, 1996). Likewise, we seek to contribute to critical scholarship that articulates vernacular discourses to Latino/a communication studies (Holling, 2006, Calafell & Delgado, 2004, Delgado, 1998a, 1998b; Flores & Hasian, 1997) and which further contributes to the growing body of Latino/a communication studies (Calafell, 2004; Guzmán & Valdivia, 2004; Mayer, 2004; Rojas, 2004; Valdivia, 2004; Zazueta Martínez, 2004).

Our following analysis elucidates how the reception of Rigoberta Menchú’s work before and after the challenge became a pivotal case of discursive strategies. It presents a rare moment of public post-structural debate. In it, the ongoing but normally subtle post-structural questioning of the epistemological and ontological foundations of knowledge production was pushed to the forefront in a public negotiation that leaped beyond academic circles and played out in different discursive communities. Various communities (academics, journalists, and alternative/indigenous media) have connected to this debate in different ways; we will demonstrate how those communities engaged the implications (personal, cultural, scholarly/epistemological, and political) of this controversial case.

We begin our particular critique with some critical highlights of the Rigoberta Menchú story and a brief overview of the claims and arguments that appear in the original 1983 Spanish language text of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (“My name is Rigoberta Menchú and this is how my consciousness was born.”) and a few of Menchú’s other works that followed in English such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984; 1998), as well as an explanation of the challenge to her work by anthropologist David Stoll. This is followed by an analysis of the unique role that *testimonio* plays in Latin American discursive strategies, some of which were articulated in Spanish and therefore required Spanish to English translations.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing from a wide sample of various minority community newspapers that had engaged the Rigoberta Menchú story, we then examine how those minority communities reacted to this attack (once again, some of those vernacular expressions required translation from the Spanish original). Moreover, we tie this to recent academic discourse related to the controversy. In the concluding portions of the essay, we defend the heuristic value of *testimonio* in the Menchú-Stoll controversy, and evaluate the discursive relevance of such cases for future investigations in Latino/a communication studies.

### **RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ’S GUATEMALAN TALES**

The story of Rigoberta Menchú [Tum] begins around January 9, 1959, when she was born into a family in Guatemala where she and an

extended community including her family and village neighbors worked under harsh conditions for basic survival. According to Menchú's 1983 biography, the working conditions at the *fincas* in Guatemala were so difficult that her family and village were barely able to eek out their existence. They survived the most atrocious of living conditions, enduring hunger, poverty, and disease, in addition to dishonesty, brutal takeovers of land, death, violence, murder, massacre at the hands of the *Ladinos*, "the primarily European descent, landowning class in Guatemala" (Lincoln, 2000, p. 131). As Menchú notes, "It's very difficult for a person to reach the age of 15 years, given such conditions" (Menchú, 1983, pp. 22–26).<sup>3</sup> When the family wasn't working on the coffee *fincas* or cotton *fincas* day after day, they returned to their village and grew maize in the high mountains of Guatemala. Although Menchú writes that the family and villagers always liked it better at their village home in the *altiplano*, the living conditions were sometimes just as harsh, and they were literally at the mercy of nature and wild animals. The significance of such difficult living conditions for Menchú, the Quiché/K'iché Mayas,<sup>4</sup> and other indigenous groups is that these people managed to survive against the most indeterminate odds and that these people remained in such conditions as a result of Guatemalan government corruption and military control. Menchú's book thus resonated with readers around the world who felt that they could identify with these local struggles, and with those who felt that her book provided experiential evidence of the daily hurdles that confronted many indigenous peoples.

Western interest in the plight of these indigenous communities has waxed and waned, but there is little question that the debates about authenticity and representativeness of Rigoberta Menchú's work helped with consciousness-raising and with the creation of transregional and transnational alliances. Menchú became an organizer in the indigenous farmers movement, and she led the fight for basic human rights and social justice for all Latin American and indigenous peoples. Due to her social activism and high profile, she was exiled from Guatemala in 1980 and relocated to México thereafter.

However, Menchú's exile only added to her stature. In addition to authoring her own book, she became an invited lecturer at universities across the United States. She has also been a featured speaker at conferences on gender and empowerment, and has been an honored guest at Native American conferences that valorize the work of those who represent indigenous rights. Menchú became the iconic example of the Mayan who could now speak in spite of the oppressions that she and her community had suffered at the hands of the *Ladinos*. She was commemorated in murals, and she was also the subject of a documentary film about her life

in Guatemala and the impossible conditions faced by her family and people. Eventually, her status reached the point where she became a living signifier for the representation of past societal abuses, and in one instance, the Pope summoned Menchú to ask forgiveness for some of the acts of Spanish conquest that impacted the histories of some of the indigenous peoples in the Americas.

Since winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 Menchú not only maintains her high visibility, but actually seems to grow stronger in her efforts as she continues to be an international human rights activist. She continues to speak on behalf of native and indigenous peoples in Guatemala, and is often reported as a speaker or activist in social causes and protests in Guatemala and other Latin American countries. One contributor to the *News From Indian Country* (Colclough, 1995) provides just one example of these many reports when she notes how “Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú has launched a campaign to boost voter turnout by Guatemala’s Indians . . .” (para. 1).

Given the celebratory nature of these commentaries, and the valorization of Menchú’s work, one can readily understand why conservatives and other observers might be bothered by the audience reception of some of this work. Lather (2000), for example, asks:

How is one to assess the “truth content” of her story, this much worked-over text of the corn-centered culture of the villages, the rights of birth, marriage, and death, work and migration patterns, machismo, junta governments, and mass organization of solidarity? What happens if one turns, rather to its “truth effect,” amplified perhaps by Menchú’s own efforts to raise the possibility of ambiguity, half-truth and outright error. . . . What kind of historical truth are we talking about here? (p. 154)

At the same time that some critics were applauding the consciousness-raising that was taking place, and noting the arrival of a decade of glorious moments and flashes of vindication for Menchú and the Guatemalan people, there were those interlocutors who injected themselves into whirlwinds of political controversies and academic debates. Not very long after Menchú won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, anthropologist David Stoll gained a great deal of publicity when he openly attacked many of the claims that were advanced in Menchú’s biography, and for the next decade, questions of authorial intent, scholarly evidence, and historiographic “truth” were closely connected to remembrances of the Quiché Mayas, Guatemalan internal politics, and academic cultural wars.

**DAVID STOLL, THE SUPPOSED PROBLEMATICS OF TESTIMONIO, AND THE SEARCH FOR SCHOLARLY OBJECTIVITY**

During the mid to late 1990s, David Stoll took up the challenge of critiquing Menchú's work, and he presented himself as "a sympathetic and earnest scholar troubled yet undaunted in his search for truth" (McLaren & Pinkney-Pastrana, 2000, p. 163). Stoll traveled to Guatemala, where he interviewed a number of governmental officials and private citizens, and concluded that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1998) was filled with fanciful stories, exaggerated events, false claims about witnessing, and inaccurate places and dates. His research raised questions about Menchú's methods and claims, and he argued that it appeared that she was simply serving as a dupe for Marxist guerillas who wanted to denigrate the work of all of the *Ladinos* and their histories. In a letter to *The Nation*, Stoll (1999) argued that one "of the dangers of Menchú's story is that as the expression of a novice cadre, it enshrines a rationale for guerrilla warfare that continues to enchant the left in New Haven long after it has lost its appeal in rural Guatemala" (p. 2). Critics could then question whether Menchú really speaks for indigenous populations, and they can treat her texts as fictional accounts that bear little resemblance to the realities of the situation.

In Stoll's chronology of historical events, the indigenous populations in Guatemala were never really supportive of any Marxist *guerrilleros'* efforts, and these misguided revolutionary activities simply perpetuated a cycle of violence that could have ended long ago. Thus, the popularity of Menchú's texts is viewed as simply the recirculation of leftist propaganda, which stands in the way of political compromise and concessions.

At the same time that Stoll recontextualizes Guatemala's history, he excoriates Menchú for having produced a book that is (allegedly) filled with unproven facts and misstatements. Her autobiography text, he notes, "is not the eyewitness account it purports to be," because it is filled with descriptions of experiences she never had herself (Stoll, 1998, p. 70). For example, he argues that in spite of her claims, she never actually witnessed the death of her brother Patrocinio, that she received a good education in Catholic boarding schools in Guatemala City, that her impoverished family was never involved in any major conflicts with land-owning *Ladinos*, and that she didn't work on any coastal export plantations (Stoll, 1998; McLaren and Pinkney-Pastrana, 2000, p. 165).

In many ways, Stoll's criticisms of Menchú's work involve more than simply the politicization of autobiographical work—he undermines the legitimacy and authority of all works that appear to be offering "nonlegal testimony in a public sphere marked by legalistic definitions of truth telling, evidence, harm, and redress" (Gilmore, 2003, p. 695). When Rohter

(1998) and other members of the press began quoting and publicizing Stoll's work, some of the "discrepancies" that were found in her work were used as evidence that her *testimonio* was simply propaganda for organizations such as the Guatemala Army of the Poor (EGP). In many of the traditional media outlets in the West, Menchú's work was now reconfigured as impressionistic, and they recycled Stoll's remarks about her "aura of unchallengeability" (Stoll, 1998, p. 195) and her transfixing of "foreigners" (p. 197). By accentuating her "gifts as an orator and protagonist," he tried to belittle the social and anthropological validity of her work. Gugelberger (1999) captures the tone of Stoll's attack when he surmises that her critics were treating her edited autobiography as a form of "fantasmas," an "endless monologue" filled with psychological confusions (p. 49).

### THE ROLE OF TESTIMONIO

For many scholars and researchers, the role of *testimonio* is at the heart of the Rigoberta Menchú-David Stoll controversy. Although Menchú characterized her book as the "recording" of "my testimony" (Menchú, 1998, p. 113), she explicitly mentioned in the original book how her autobiography was "also the testimony of my people" (Menchú, 1983, p. 9). As Menchú testified in the first (Spanish) version of the book, "my personal situation encompasses the reality of a community" (p. 21).<sup>5</sup> In the aforementioned rhetorical analysis of the Menchú controversy, Delgado (1999) argues for the importance of viewing the Menchú's case through an intercultural lens and that Menchú's *testimonio* should be understood as a collectivist form of discourse. Interestingly, Delgado's analysis does not further develop the specific meaning and significance of *testimonio* as a discursive genre.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, our analysis here builds on the work of Delgado and focuses on the discursive importance of *testimonio* as a speech genre.

Our analysis of the primary and secondary literature on conditions in Guatemala, Spanish-language commentaries on Rigoberta Menchú's work, and other vernacular observations on the Menchú-Stoll controversy, indicates that *testimonio* serves at least four key discursive functions; 1) it provides a sense of autobiographical truth and voice for those who write about the trials and tribulations of the Maya "campesinos"; 2) it helps create alliances and a sense of solidarity among readers who sympathize with these indigenous communities; 3) it supplies the discursive materials for historical remembrances; and 4) it functions as a counter-hegemonic literary device that can be used in political critiques of Guatemalan government decisions, military actions, and truth commissions.

Some of the reasons that Western observers struggle to understand *testimonio* can be traced to the fact that this type of genre blurs the traditional boundaries that exist between fact and fiction, material truths and

social truths, and the acts of recording and witnessing. In *testimonio*, notes Vilches-Norat (1990), "the construction of the text constitutes the articulation of the subaltern life. . .the once mute is allowed a voice, and it ultimately forms the ulterior motive of the storytelling" (p. 155).<sup>7</sup> By treating *testimonio* as a type of communal device for the creation and dissemination of truth, many Mayans and other Latin Americans feel that they are gaining a voice in the political conversations that take place in their region. Vilches-Norat elaborates by explaining that "*Testimonio* defies traditional forms of literary production . . . it is an alternative discursive space, that permits those who are not formally educated to participate in the literary enterprise" (p. 2).<sup>8</sup>

By telling about their individual or experiences in the form of autobiographical truth-telling, commentators hope that their views will resonate with those who might have shared similar experiences. Garcia (1997) notes some of the reasons for the significance and complexity of *testimonio*:

This is, precisely, a fundamental principle of the *testimonio* narrative—that the majority of readers appropriate or at least "make their own" whatever is presented as *testimonio*. Such an act guarantees, apart from the commercial implications, a representative foundation that is, to a certain extent, independent of truth and legitimized through the very act of giving *testimonio* in the midst of critical opposition to doing so.<sup>9</sup> (p. 240)

The purveyors of *testimonio* frustrate scholars who are interested in the search for universal truths about the past or the present; these rhetors take advantage of the "many slippages" that exist between "a 'people' and their assumed representative, the nonunitary speaking subject, the relationship between knower and known, and an assumed audience" (Lather, 2000, p. 153).

At the same time, the use of *testimonio* helps to create alliances between groups that have been traditionally disempowered—politically, legally, socially, or economically. As Sommer (1991) notes, the indigenous peoples who deploy these rhetorical fragments often live on the margins of Western discursive societies, and they are interested in hearing from other allies who might be interested in the formation of a more egalitarian sharing of symbolic and material resources. Vilches-Norat (1990) avers that the "*testimonio* phenomenon covers a cultural territory that goes beyond national boundaries, which is why it's necessary to study it as a Latin American literary system" (p. 2).<sup>10</sup> In the same way that Gilroy (1993) highlights the importance of covering the Black migration of ideas and culture as Transatlantic diaspora, those who deploy various forms of *testimonio* cross a variety of borders, both literally and figuratively.

Part of the evocative power of *testimonio* comes from the way in which the communal acts of testifying enable Latin Americans to tell about their own versions of the past, the causes of their present situations, and their future hopes and aspirations. "It is not the *testimonio*'s uncontaminated positing of some pure, truthful, native history that makes it so powerful," argues Colas (1996), "but rather its subversion of such a project" (p. 170). The social agents who deploy these genres aren't always interested in the creation of any linear genealogies, footnoted books, or documentary film accounts of their lives. Thus, in the process of telling their own tales they run the risk of being accused of inconsistency, falsehood, and exaggeration. The popularity of *testimonio*, and the communal nature of the enterprise, only complicates matters as multiple versions of some of these recollections appear on several discursive horizons.

In sum, this unique literary device resonates with many marginalized ethnic groups because it provides them with the tools that they need for social critique and public commentary, and spaces for oppositional argumentation. In many ways, it is these very debates about Guatemalan histories, interpretations, and mistranslations that serve important ideological functions, because they provide the vehicles whereby indigenous authors can write about the frustration of living in a dominant culture that retains, at least partially, the legacy of being colonized by Spanish conquerors. Dieguez (1989), for example, notes that *testimonio* "is a subversion of the ideologies of discovery, conquest, and colonization that continue to the present and are so well illustrated in Menchú's book" (p. 216).<sup>11</sup>

### **VERNACULAR VOICES, INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES, AND ACADEMIC DEBATES**

Given the wide disparities that exist between Menchú's and Stoll's views on Latin American politics, we argue here for the importance of taking into account how various press, public, and academic communities reacted to this volatile controversy. Thus, we used a large, purposive sample of journalistic articles about Rigoberta Menchú that appeared in different languages (vernacular voices), and we found that while many commentators understood Stoll's reservations, the majority of observers tried to defend both Menchú's work and the use of *testimonio*. These various critics talked about the veracity of her claims, the representative nature of Menchú's autobiography, Stoll's possible motivations, and the global importance of *testimonio*.

In a variety of Spanish-speaking community newspapers, contributors identified with Menchú and valorized her efforts. A 1992 article in *El Pregonero* reported that the bestowal of Rigoberta Menchú's Nobel Peace Prize "not only recognizes the fight for vindication of Guatemalan

'Indians,' but of all indigenous peoples throughout América" ("Premio controversial," 1992, para. 7).<sup>12</sup> During that same year, a writer for *La Opinión* celebrated Menchú's accomplishment, reporting that, "Rigoberta Menchú stands in front of the world a new Indian citizen, a citizen of the Republic of Guatemala that is about to be born" (Aguilar, 1992, para. 14).<sup>13</sup>

At the same time that some public critics talked about the veracity of Menchú's autobiographical work, others also underscored the representative nature of her claims and allegations. Note, for example, the way that Hernández (1999) explains that the "history of Rigoberta Menchú that is narrated in her book is the history of the tribe, a collective history, which is the same as the 'cosmovision' of the Maya people" (para. 9).<sup>14</sup> Another writer intoned that Menchú's autobiography could be championed for "resisting neocolonialist ideologies, challenging Eurocentric assumptions of time and space, subverting Spanish language hegemony on indigenous American communities, and articulating feminist responses to patriarchy" (Garcia, 1997, p. 229).

In many of the vernacular publications that discussed the Menchú-Stoll controversy, observers commented on how Stoll's attack seemed to be geared toward domesticating and containing the voice of various marginalized communities. As San (1999) noted in *The Asian Reporter*, it seemed as though Stoll and other writers of his ilk were suddenly playing up their own "credentials and entitlements in order to put the 'upstart' subalterns in their proper place" (p. 6). This critic contextualized this literary dispute as one that seemed to be clearly connected to the larger "culture wars":

Obviously, the question of knowledge of what is real occupies center stage. Much more than this, what concerns us is the usage to which such knowledge is put. Inflected in the realm of knowledge about culture and society, the problem of representing the world (events, personalities) looms large, distilled in such questions as: Who speaks now? For whom? And for what purpose? (p. 6)

Implicitly buried in these questions were the subtextual answers—not people like Stoll. Likewise, Beverley (2005) insists that, "the argument is not so much about what really happened as it is about who has the authority to narrate" (p. 551).

Furthermore, some of the most popular arguments that were leveled against Stoll concerned his apparent motivations, and many of the vernacular voices that were heard in these various public arenas viewed his critique of Menchú's *testimonio* as an attack on their own sense of self-worth and ethnic identification. For example, Red Shirt (1999) worried that if empowered communities accepted David's Stoll's critique, the

“ordinary, the indigenous people” would be “back to ground zero, trying to regain” political footage (para. 10–12).

Many of the vernacular voices who discussed Menchú’s trials and tribulations also underscored the international importance of her work for many different indigenous communities. For example, in a 1993 article in *Horizontes*, Menchú’s awards were viewed as evidence that the “‘pendulum’ of historical interpretations has swung from the initial tone of European-ist celebrations, to a re-evaluation of the indigenous question throughout all of the continent” (“El año que,” 1993, para. 1). An unidentified essayist for the *Indian Country Today* (*Lakota Times*) claimed that the Nobel Peace Prize, “opened crucial political space for Guatemala’s Maya people. After horrible suffering, they would never again be invisible or voiceless” (“International Arena,” 2000, para. 17).

In addition to Menchú’s being a guest of honor at Native-American/First Nation festivals (see Barnsley, 2001), one should note other alliances that Menchú has made with Native-American, First Nation, and other indigenous communities throughout the Américas. In a 1992 article in *News From Indian Country*, Peña wrote that “Menchú struggles for all native people” (p. 1). Seven years later, a member of the International Indian Treaty Council, Vernon Bellecourt, said that the awarding of Menchú’s Nobel Peace Prize “was a victory for democracy, as well as for Native self-determination” (Armstrong, 1999, para. 18). This same writer noted that, “Native people should take advantage of the international spotlight on Menchú to demand war crimes prosecution of individuals in the Guatemalan regime and reassess their relationship with the U.S. and Canadian governments” (Armstrong, 1999, para. 19).

Interestingly, in the wake of Stoll’s criticism many interdisciplinary academics have also chosen sides and rearticulated their positions on questions related to the role of *testimonio*, Menchú’s leadership, and the true state of affairs in Guatemala. One of the most popular academic defenses of Menchú’s work involved the strategy of explaining the unique role of such *testimonios* in Latin American discourse. As early as 1989, Dieguez noted how one can tell from the very first paragraph that Menchú’s autobiographical accounts were presented “with marvelous simplicity and force, from the collective point of view that is predominant throughout the entire work” (Dieguez, 1989, p. 209).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Vilches-Norat (1990) proclaimed that the use of family-cultural histories was a notable structural feature of collective imaginaries (p. 137). She was convinced that, “In *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, giving testimony as ‘I’ is the same as giving testimony as the culture that is represented. The constitution of the subject is parallel to the construction of a contestatory space of cultural resistance” (p. 152).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Dieguez (1989) remarked that Menchú “is not only positioning herself relationally as a victim of

colonialist-capitalist oppression, but as a proud heir of traditional Quiché Maya ways, who is reclaiming the traditions, customs, and ceremonies of an indigenous culture" (p. 212).<sup>17</sup> This focus on the role of communal identification was something that was mentioned by a plethora of scholars who rushed to Menchú's side.

In communication studies, Delgado (1999) also defended Menchú, concluding that her testimony could be understood rhetorically, as a collectivist discourse. Education scholar Trueba (2000) argues that Menchú's accounts should be understood in terms of her reference to "brothers" and "sisters" as classificatory, extended family connections, and categories of brothers and sisters, and that Menchú's claims are not at all secrets to anyone who has ever been to Guatemala or other Latin American nations. Moreover, Sanford (1999) underscores the fact that aside from the veracity of Menchú's story, many of Menchú's claims were corroborated by the work of the truth commission ("Comisión para El Esclarecimiento Histórico") which had actually published reports on premeditated fire-bombings and attacks on villages.

With regard to the lack of linear chronology in her storytelling, her advocates responded that these ruptures simply added to the veracity of her work—"the author obligates us to confront her history on terms dictated by her, configuring herself as a subject in a different time, suspended and that is not the same as that of the narrator" (Dieguez, 1989, pp. 223–238).

Moreover, when some Westerners who only read the English-language translation challenged her claims, some academics emphasized the fact that lost in translation was the fact that in the original Spanish language version Menchú appeared to be using a style of writing that purposely appropriated and subverted the use of Spanish, the former colonizer's language. Dieguez (1989) thus admonishes readers to remember that she may not have used her indigenous Quiché language in the writing of her texts, but that her particular usage of the Spanish was strategic because it reminded readers that this was the language used to exploit and subjugate various indigenous groups. She was convinced that "perhaps the most revolutionary aspect of the Menchú's appropriation of the enemy's own language" was its employment in the "forging of an indigenous unity" (p. 246).<sup>18</sup> In other words, the language that had once served as an old vehicle for alienation and division was now being appropriated for a pan-indigenous front and a resistance movement (p. 247). These types of commentaries about both Menchú's work seemed to ratify the notion about *testimonios* having a revolutionary, resistant, and subversive character.

Similarly, many scholars tried to point out that Stoll (1998) simply didn't understand the role that literary criticism played in modern social activism, and they assessed his own contradictions, methods, and objectivist

claims. Within these academic accounts of Menchú's work, Stoll was characterized as an outsider who simply misunderstood the symbolic importance of *testimonio*. Gugelberger (1999) provided a typical example of the commentary when he noted that Stoll, a "self-declared" sociocultural anthropologist, seemed to be confusing testimonial literature with life histories, traditional autobiographies, or documentaries. He was sure that *testimonio* was a "hybrid and complex genre," which provided truths that couldn't be captured by Stoll's "false memory" approach to her work (p. 48).

Several academics questioned Stoll's objectivist claims and his motivations. McLaren and Pinkney-Pastrana (2000) averred that "Rigoberta is villainized by the lubricity of Stoll's orientalist and counter-revolutionary gaze," and they highlighted the nature of his "perniciously reactionary temper" and "ideological agenda" (pp. 165–166). Trueba (2000) similarly chastised Stoll and his work as an "armchair search for the truth" and a kind of intellectualism that is at once "arrogant," "biased," and "irrelevant" (p. 126). He posited that Stoll's critique was an example of what not to do in academic research, and advocated that scholars engage in "serious first-hand research" (p. 129). McLaren and Pinkney-Pastrana (2000) worried that Stoll was "infantilizing" the Mayas, and were disturbed by the fact that he appeared to be blaming "government massacres of Indians on communists-at-large and the historical memory of Guevaristas and Fidelistas" (p. 167).

In another example of some of the criticisms that have come Stoll's way, Beck and Sieber (2002) argue that his analysis of the English-language translation of Menchú's book missed many subtle linguistic nuances. They contend that Menchú's original *testimonio* involved translations and usages of *chiasmus* as a mnemonic device derived from (ancient) storytelling, that were actually included in the original Spanish language version of her "testimony." According to Beck and Sieber (2002), the significance of this form of storytelling would indicate that Menchú's *testimonio* was continuing a tradition of telling stories about an entire people, that would be missed by those who didn't understand this form of symbolization; ". . . the presence of *chiasmus* in *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* demonstrates that if the structure is dominated by a mythological source such as the *Popol Vuh*, then certainly the content is bound to be dominated by mythological sources as well" (p. 55).

Not surprisingly, there were those who worried that Stoll's modernism and epistemic assumptions were Eurocentrically problematic. For example Arias (2002) argued that, "it is a symbolic lesson about the unwillingness of hegemonic intellectuals to listen to subaltern ones" (p. 482). At the same time, Arias further commented that Stoll did not calculate that people would not take kindly to his "imperial 'we'" (p. 483) and his "callous" portrayal of "exotic bumbling leftists of color" (p. 501). Meanwhile, Beck

and Sieber (2002) asserted that Stoll was attempting "to demythologize results" in ways that had a "tendency to demonize," and they offered the point that "Stoll's method" could "only be fairly characterized as a use of a scholarly standard applied with a Western ruler" (p. 48). What made this even more problematic were the linkages that Beck and Sieber made between accepting or refusing Menchú's *testimonio* and "the credibility of Western scholarship to absorb postmodernist, postcolonialist and feminist voices, issues and thought in anything less than a dismissive manner" (p. 60).

In another example, Gilmore (2003) noted that while Stoll was complaining about the subjectivity of her *testimonio*, he took at face value the truth claims of those who tried to puncture holes in her stories by pointing out inconsistencies. Moreover, his discrediting of Menchú's work never went in the direction of denying the "vast majority of incidents" that she described, "including the kidnapping, torture, rape, and murder of Menchú's mother, the multiple imprisonments and torture of her father," and her "detailed representation of Mayan culture" (p. 703). The ambivalences, contradictions, and omissions that could be found in Menchú's work were treated by some of her defenders as attributes of *testimonio* in general, and not as evidence of any "mendacity" (pp. 703–704).

Still other scholars have entered the discussion from different angles, arguing that the primary question in the controversy is how biography works within the realm of academic enterprise or scholarly research. For example, Devillard et al. (1995) write that what is at play in such discussions that connect subjectivity and social science with biography are really the basic tenets of sociology as a discipline (p. 147). They add that although "biography is not an element that substantively defines the field of sociology, it allows one to confront in a special way the basic questions of social science" (p. 148).<sup>19</sup> The significance of the Menchú case cannot be overstated as Arias (2002) confirms, "Indeed, one of the lessons of the controversy is the need to include Latin American scholarship in North American research, an uncanny absence in most contemporary North American research to this day, especially in the social sciences" (p. 503). And finally, Garcia (1997) argues more forcefully that Menchú's texts provide her with a "postura intelectual de la postmodernidad" ("a postmodern intellectual posture"), which highlights the ways that European science and logical analysis are dependent on the indigenous culture to enrich their concepts and theories (p. 242). This meant that the anthropologist—Burgos-Debray—was trading places with Menchú, as the former now had to be educated in the ways of the Quiché-Maya culture by the latter (p. 241).

In sum, the attitudes toward the Menchú-Stoll controversy were tied to perspectives on Latin American politics, the role of *testimonio*, and the blurring of academic and vernacular voices. For some critics, the popularity of Menchú's work seemed to provide just one more reason why her

writings couldn't be taken seriously. In an interview with the *New York Times* contributor, Stoll remarked that part of these problems were caused by the fact that she "presented herself as an everywoman," who "tried to be all things to all people," in "a way no individual can be" (quoted in Rohter, 1998, p. A-8). He was sure that readers needed to be warned about the differences that existed between texts that "can be corroborated and what cannot, what is probable and what is highly improbable" (p. A-8). What he failed to take into account was the constitutive nature of the discourse that surrounded this debate, which was being co-produced by a variety of rhetors, audiences, and voices.

### CONCLUSION

This analysis of the Menchú-Stoll discourse illustrates the nexus between autobiographical truth, collective memories, social agency, and the epistemological dilemmas of knowledge production. In this case there are situations where polarized communities disagree about the causes of atrocities, the role of those who speak for the oppressed, and the standards that will be used in evaluating the veracity of particular testimonial narratives.

It also highlights many of the difficulties that are involved when various discursive communities search for standards that will be used in reconstructing our tales of the past. In many ways, the Menchú-Stoll debate became a site of open contestation between competing collective memories. The complexity of the case allowed various participants in the controversy to co-opt the aspects of the biography (such as Menchú's life, her family, the Guatemalan government, or the Guevaristas). What began as a debate about the authenticity of one person's work was turned into a contest of memories, where various participants had to make decisions about what would be remembered (and forgotten) in select renditions of Guatemala's turbulent past. Menchú's supporters focused attention on the representative nature of her claims, and the communal nature of her *testimonio*, while many of her critics wanted to interrogate the truthfulness of many specific acts and claims. While the former group concentrated on the typicality of Menchú's trials and tribulations and viewed her Nobel Peace Prize as a victory for indigenous rights, her detractors were convinced that all of this support came from some massive misunderstanding of the role of the Guatemalan government.

Beyond that the Menchú-Stoll controversy also became a platform for negotiating the politics and epistemological foundations of postmodern knowledge production. While elite journalists and traditional academics underscored the objective standards as necessary for dispassionate inquiry, indigenous writers and postmodern scholars in the U.S. and Latin

America legitimized *testimonio* as a postmodern style of writing—even more as a model for future knowledge production.

How critics choose to evaluate this controversy is itself a performative act, which involves a form of ideological and epistemological critique and judgment. The very controversy that surrounded the Menchú-Stoll debate served as a catalyzing event in the discursive battle over Guatemalan memories and journalistic and academic knowledge production. In spite—or perhaps because—of Stoll's attack on Menchú's work, millions of students and admirers took up her cause and provided their own vicarious histories and memories. Both her supporters and her critics became a part of relational competitions between select histories and memories, where various publics, the print media, and the academic communities reevaluated their vested interests that would be tied to commentaries on the role of *testimonio* (Arias, 2002; Menchú & Burgos-Debray, 1983; Carey-Webb & Benz, 1996; Kempen, 2001; Menchú, 1998; Stoll, 1993, 1999; Silverstone & Bunch, 1999; Schulze, 1997; Zimmerman, 1995).

While we can sympathize with Stoll's quest for historical accuracy and autobiographical veracity, we feel that he misunderstood some of the reasons why Menchú's story resonated with so many different international audiences. People who accepted or rejected her work—both before and after she received the Nobel prize—were not simply "romancing the Revolution," as he thought (Stoll, 1999, p. 277), or fulfilling "our legitimacy as observers of people who are so much less fortunate than we" (p. 276). These people participated in a co-production of discourse, where a host of discursive communities were crafting the communication that surrounded both Menchú the person, and Menchú the myth.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated how even a text tied to purportedly individual social agency is a matter of public negotiation. In this case open contestation allowed various communities to comment on remembrances of a human rights campaigner, conditions in Guatemala, and the importance of *testimonio*. Stoll (1999) may have sincerely believed that his search for the fact of Menchú's life was helping the "Latin American left and its foreign supporters escape the captivity of Guevarismo" (p. 282), but he exaggerated the individuated role that both he and Menchú played in this complex contest. Menchú's biography and Stoll's challenge became catalysts for an ongoing (re)telling of Latin American collective memory and signified the enduring politics of memory work.

Furthermore, we agree with Garcia (1997) who notes that these public debates illustrate the importance of investigating such cases that provide insight on novel communication outlets (p. 234). The journalists and scholars who were commenting on the Menchú-Stoll debate were not simply passive recipients of these tales—they were engaged in their own acts of *testimonio*, and adding to Menchú's stature. Given the "carácter

polisémico” (polysemic character) of Menchú’s autobiography, we argue for the necessity to pay attention to vernacular voices in terms of “el remitente” (the source), “transmisión” (transmission), and “recepción” (reception) of these texts (pp. 255, 273). Given the evocative power of this controversy, and the variegated richness of the academic and public debates that surrounded Menchú’s defenses of her claims, we felt that it was imperative that communication scholars attend to both the textual and contextual elements of these controversies. The Menchú case gave us an opportunity as communication scholars to reopen the debate in communication studies by integrating so far suppressed voices of the indigenous (often Spanish-language) media and Spanish-language scholarship on this case. This effort is an important step towards developing communication studies grounded in Latino/a discourse(s).

Nevertheless, yet another important part of the Menchú-Stoll debate that warrants further attention is the role that gender plays, both in the context of the debate as well as in the rhetorical form of *testimonio* itself. It is surely no coincidence that *testimonio* can be articulated to other knowledge discourses where women are prominent, and especially to those by women of color (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1991; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983). *Testimonio* bears similarities to women’s *midrash* tradition of Jewish feminism, an inherently tribal-oriented tradition of expression where the narrative is owned by all, as well as similarity to the critical literature of other white feminists (Blair in Ostriker, 1993, pp. 7–13). While a feminist analysis was not the focus of this particular essay, our research illuminates the possibility of a feminist analysis of the discourse surrounding the Menchú controversy and begs the question of what future research on this topic will reveal to communication scholars in terms of gender analysis. Likewise, just as many other scholars remark that the Menchú story is rich and full of untapped potential, we hope that other communication scholars will also realize that we are just beginning to scratch the surface of some of these complex discursive debates in communication studies.

## NOTES

1. In fact, the controversy surrounding Rigoberta Menchú has been so great over the past decade that an entire journal issue of *Latin American Perspectives* was published in 1999 to address some of the important issues surrounding Menchú.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all of the translations from the Spanish were provided by one of the authors. For some of our Spanish-speaking readers, we have moved most of the original phrases to the endnotes section of this article.
3. “Muy difícil que una persona llegue a tener los quince años, así con vida” (Menchú & Burgos-Debray, 1983, pp. 22–26).

4. Here we should note some of the inconsistencies in the translations of some Spanish terms. For example, readers will sometimes come across both "Quiché" Maya and "K'iché" Maya. In some texts the name of the people appears with the former spelling, and in other texts it appears with the latter.
5. "Mi situación personal engloba toda la realidad de un pueblo" (Menchú, 1983, p. 21).
6. In fact, Delgado's (1999) essay only mentions "testimonials," a casual English-language translation of *testimonio*, without ever really engaging the exact meaning of *testimonios* a Spanish-language genre of discourse.
7. "En el testimonio la construcción del texto constituye la articulación de la vida de la subalterna. Que el antes mudo obtenga voz, configura en última instancia el objetivo ulterior de la narración" (Vilches-Norat, 1990, p. 155).
8. "El testimonio desafía las formas tradicionales de producción de lo literario. De aquí que sea un espacio discursivo alternativo, puesto que permite a los 'no letrados' participar de lo literario" (Vilches-Norat, 1990, p. 2).
9. "Este es, precisamente, un propósito de la narrativa testimonial: que la mayor parte de los lectores se 'apropie' or por lo menos 'haga suyo' el material testificado. Tal acto garantiza; aparte de las implicaciones comerciales, una base de representatividad hasta cierto punto independiente de su veracidad, y legitimizada por el acto de dar testimonio por encima de consideraciones críticas al respecto" (García, 1997, p. 240).
10. "El fenómeno testimonial cubre un territorio cultural que rebasa los límites nacionales, por tal razón la necesidad de estudiarlo como sistema literario hispanoamericano" (Vilches-Norat, 1990, p. 2).
11. "No obstante, el testimonio indígena es, obviamente, mucho más una subversión de los relatos del descubrimiento, la conquista y la colonia que una continuación de éstos, como ilustra magníficamente la obra que aquí nos ocupa" (Dieguez, 1989, p. 216).
12. "El otorgamiento del nobel de la paz a Rigoberta no solo ha venido a reconocer la lucha reivindicadora de los 'indios' quatemaltecos, sino la de todos los pueblos indígenas de América" ("Premio controversial," 1992, para. 7).
13. "Rigoberta Menchú es ante el mundo la nueva ciudadana india, ciudadana de la nueva República de Guatemala que están gestando" (Aguilar, 1992, para. 14).
14. "La historia de Rigoberta Menchú narrada en su libro es la historia de la tribu, una historia colectiva, tal como es la cosmovisión del pueblo maya" (Hernández, 1999, para. 9).
15. ". . . con maravillosa simplicidad y fuerza, el punto de vista colectivo que predominará a lo largo de toda la obra . . ." (Dieguez, 1989, p. 209).
16. "En *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, testimoniar el 'yo' es testimoniar la cultura que se representa. La constitución del sujeto es paralela a la construcción de un espacio contestario de resistencia cultural" (Vilches-Norat, 1990, p. 152).
17. "A lo largo de su relato, la autora se nos presenta muy deliberadamente no sólo como víctima de la opresión colonial-capitalista, sino también, y primordialmente, como orgullosa heredera de la rica cultura constituida por las tradiciones, costumbres y ceremonias mayas" (Dieguez, 1989, p. 212).
18. ". . . tal vez el aspecto más revolucionario de la apropiación del idioma del enemigo efectuada por Menchú sea el empleo en la forja de la unidad indígena" (Dieguez, 1989, p. 246).

19. "Aunque la biografía no sea un elemento que define sustantivamente a la sociología, permite abordar de un modo especial cuestiones básicas de la ciencia social" (Devillard et al., 1995, p. 148).

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