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Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans
(review)

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being Guatemalan, and the newly-found bravery and hope of a people who refuse to submit to five centuries of repression – Maya and Ladino alike. This valuable volume takes those of us who study Latin America, violence around the world, and the difficult process of justice in post-war societies on a fruitful path of increased understanding about life after widespread massacres. The book will not serve well as an introductory text to Guatemala, but is aimed more at an academic audience already well-versed in recent Central American society. Thank you Victoria Sanford for courageous fieldwork and for bringing to light how rural Guatemalans can begin to rebuild their lives by first coming to terms with the truth.

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David Stoll. **Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans**. Boulder: Westview Press, 1999. xxi and 336 pp., notes, bibliography, and index. \$27.00 cloth (ISBN 0-8133-3574-4).

Controversy has surrounded the publication of David Stoll's book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, from Day One and no review can begin without acknowledging this fact. Compelled to expose how a "valuable symbol can also be misleading," (p. x) Stoll challenges the icon of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Rigoberta Menchú, by comparing her life story with local testimony and documentary sources. Stoll, a professor of anthropology at Middlebury College, contends that key points might not be true in the Guatemalan's testimonio — a first person narrative of individual and collective experiences — titled, *I Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984), and that "it is not the eyewitness account that it purports to be" (p. 70).

Rigoberta Menchú was the first indigenous woman to speak out about the repression and state sanctioned violence suffered by Guatemala's indigenous population in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1982, Menchú narrated her testimonio in Paris to anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray who soon published it as *I Rigoberta Menchú*. The power of Menchú's testimonio is its first person narrative — a form of speech that worked to change public consciousness about Guatemala and eventually spurred action towards a

Peace Process and the establishment of the United Nations-sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) and the Catholic Church investigation, Recuperation of Historical Memory Project (REMHI).

Stoll's main accusations are that: (1) Menchú and her testimonio were used as a tool for advancing the revolutionary cause that she, her family, and thousands of others fought for; (2) Menchú and the left romanticized indigenous peoples and communities in Guatemala in order to advance their appeal to foreign audiences; and (3) the international acceptance of Menchú's work raises questions about a new standard of "truth" gaining ground in academia. Stoll acknowledges that he waited to publish his findings until the country's situation was somewhat stabilized and to avoid detracting from her Peace Prize campaign. But, in December 1998 Stoll's findings hit the front page of the New York Times, just two months before the presentation of the CEH to the Guatemalan people.

Stoll moves point by point through Menchú testimonio even though he found that most of the people he interviewed in her home community and surrounding villages were not particularly concerned about the collective nature of her words. Menchú clearly states in the opening lines of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984, 1): "This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people." Rather than acknowledging testimonio as a valid form of expression, Stoll treats her book as autobiography (an expression of individual experience) to highlight inconsistencies from the written record and recollections of others. Speaking of Menchú's account of her brother's torture and murder, Stoll points out that:

In and of itself, the contrast between Rigoberta's account and everyone else's is not very significant. Except for a few sensational details, Rigoberta's version follows the others and can be considered factual ... The important point is that her story, here and at critical junctures, is not the eyewitness account that it purports to be (pp. 69-70).

Stoll's reasons for pursuing this line of inquiry are not made clear, leaving deliberations regarding his motives and agenda to circulate in cyberspace, academic conferences, and editorial pages of Guatemalan newspapers. Reactions to Stoll's ten-year investigation of Menchú's narrative and his controversial and problematic assertions cover the spectrum from full support of Rigoberta's authority to speak for herself and others who have lived through similar experiences to those who know little of the context but have grabbed onto the controversy for political reasons, taking the accusations much further than even Stoll would suggest. Many critics suggest Stoll could have asked *why* the silences, inconsistencies, and conflation of experiences were, perhaps, necessary in an atmosphere of state terror (c. f., *Latin American Perspectives* 1999). A different, sympathetic, book might have been written with the same evidence. Why not examine the inconsistencies, denials, and abuses of the government and military forces (responsible for 93% of all human rights violations and acts of genocide against the Maya indigenous population, according to the CEH) rather than the testimonio of one of their victims, many charge?

It is difficult to suggest a reading of this book but for cultural geographers and others interested in issues of qualitative research it certainly presses us to think more deeply about our own methods and motivations, the political and social implications of our research, and the validity of individual and collective testimonios.

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Inge Schjellerup, Mikael Kamp Sørensen, Carolina Espinoza, Victor Quipuscoa & Victor Peña. **Los valles olvidados: Pasado y presente en la utilización de recursos en la Ceja de Selva, Perú/The Forgotten Valleys: Past and Present in the Utilization of Resources in the Ceja de Selva, Peru.** [Ethnographic Monographs, No. 1.] Copenhagen: The National Museum of Denmark. 2003. ii + 444 pp., maps, tables, figures, references, and appendix. \$21.95 paperback (ISBN 87-89384-99-7).

This tome's wide range of information focuses on a 90-km long zone lying within two drainage basins in the three Peruvian departments of Amazonas, San Martín and La Libertad. Chachapoyas, 50-100 km. to the northeast, is the urban reference point of note. High rainfall (2500-3000 mm) and humidity characterize the Huambo and Jelache valleys that, ecologically, are part of the *ceja de la montaña*. Constant drizzle, crop rot, strong currents in bridgeless rivers, dense bamboo thickets, and an abundance of *vibras ponzoñas* and zoonotic diseases, are some of the human challenges for both the inhabitant and the researcher. All along the eastern front of the Andes, the difficulties of carrying out field research in such an environment explain in good measure the dearth of studies. Project coordinator Inge Schjellerup, who has conducted studies in the wilds of northern Peru for almost 25 years, organized the research agenda in this roadless area, secured the funding and necessary permits, translated text, and wrote several sections.

Above all, the book presents a repertoire of diverse knowledge about the zone. Those looking for grand theorizations will be disappointed: the data is not shoehorned here into some preconceived framework. Its emphasis on the empirical is a refreshing change from the compulsive, almost pathetic, search for paradigmatic novelty. The book starts with the area's prehistory as revealed mainly in the descriptions of 26 surface sites, several of which were discovered by the main author. Partial excavation of a selected few of them allowed for fuller description. Stone constructions represent several periods; the last one is that of the Inca after ca. A.D. 1450. In the history chapter that follows, archival documents were used in conjunction with published chronicles to reconstruct the human presence in the region during the colonial and republican periods. From there, the book moves to the contemporary life of peasant inhabitants. Interviews and participant observation garner information on house types, education, folk beliefs (many brought from the highlands), religion (noting especially the growing influence of Pentecostalism), nutrition, health, livestock raising, crops, soils, trade (mostly coffee), and household economy. Three life histories provide authentic voices testifying to the challenges of living in this remote part of Peru. Other chapters are on vegetation, based in part on GIS analysis, and on plant use, whose identifications were backed up by hundreds of dried plant specimens,

The rich array of data provides answers and raises questions. It clarifies how the "in-betweenness" of the *ceja* environment, which converges the temperate and tropical, offers an intriguing overlap that helps to explain, for example, the presence of 77 different crops. The book's diachronic approach to human colonization contrasts the relatively dense Inca occupation during which stone terraces were used on which to grow maize and perhaps coca, and the sparse population that used swidden methods following the