

Borderlands, Cultural Citizenship, and *Mestizaje* in Feminist Testimonio Narratives

Arlette C. Pérez

The texts *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and *The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman of Chiapas, Mexico* by Christine Eber and ‘Antonia’ narrate the stories of two indigenous women who faced exclusion, oppression, and exploitation at the hands of the political hegemony of their respective countries, Guatemala and Mexico. These women reside in a multifaceted “Borderlands” as described by Gloria Anzaldúa, which encompasses the physical, ontological, and linguistic borderlands, among others. “Borderlands” also pertains to the living conditions Menchú and Antonia are forced to face: they live in a society under the umbrella of, yet remain marginalized by the state. This indeterminate territory becomes a “site of radical possibility” (hooks) from which “cultural citizenship” takes the form of an uprising demanding the autonomy and authority previously denied to their people. According to anthropologist, Renato Rosaldo,

“The term cultural citizenship is a deliberate oxymoron, a pair of words that do not go together comfortably. Cultural citizenship refers to the right to be different and to belong in a participatory democratic sense. It claims that, in a democracy, social justice calls for equity among all citizens, even when such differences as race, religion, class, gender, or sexual orientation potentially could be used to make certain people less equal or inferior to others. The notion of belonging means full membership in a group and the ability to influence one’s destiny by having a significant voice in basic decisions” (Rosaldo 402).

Through the process of mobilization, these women embrace their indigenous identity and claim their rights within the hegemony. As a result, Menchú and Antonia learn to negotiate

between cultures—their indigenous culture and that of the oppressor—in their activism and daily lives.

“Borderlands” and *mestizaje* are also present throughout the construction of the narratives present in *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and *The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman of Chiapas, Mexico*. These two concepts are inherent in the documentation of the *testimonio* itself and the collaboration between two parties necessary for the production of the final text. The ethnographer/informant relationship fraught with tension and disparities takes precedence in the creation of a *testimonio*, a “new *mestiza*” (*Borderlands*) text involving two parties with distinct worldviews and narratives symbiotically crafting a story of resistance.

Borderlands, Cultural Citizenship, and Hybridity in the Flesh

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa pioneers border theory and expands the concept of borders by encompassing the psychological, sexual, and spiritual realms. Anzaldúa engages in the rewriting of history as she narrates the plight of the Tejanos: “Tejanos lost their land and, overnight, became the foreigners” (*Borderlands* 28). By providing the reader with a view of Mexican-American history from the perspective of those unrepresented in the dominant narrative written by their oppressors, Anzaldúa also conceives the notion of “Borderlands” as marginalization. These and many other themes present in *Borderlands* make their appearance in both *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and *The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman in Chiapas, Mexico*.

The most significant contributor to “Borderlands” living is the multiple oppressions of a second-class citizenship imposed upon the indigenous people by the hegemony. The deterritorialization of the Quiché Maya residing in the midwestern highlands of Guatemala forced this group to migrate in search for work between their plot of land where they grew corn

and beans and the coffee and cotton plantations (*fincas*). Once forced to work on the *fincas*, the Menchús and their community continued to be exploited by the landowners in various forms including humiliation, the imposition of debts, promotion of alcoholism, and violence.

For Antonia, the land reforms of the Mexican Revolution did not reach the Chiapas highlands. Her people were also following this same migration in Mexico. Population increases, the increased competition of goods, and indigenous elites working with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in order to maintain their social status reduced the access to land and other resources (Eber 69). Furthermore, the 1982 peso crisis led the federal government to cut subsidies for the public sector, including farmers; and the institutionalization of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) displaced the corn industry as cheaper, mass-produced U.S. corn was made available (Eber 70). These factors working in conjunction caused the agricultural lifeways of the indigenous to disappear rapidly.

The poor living conditions of rampant poverty characterize both women's observations of their villages. Food insecurity is a common thread in both texts. "Many families don't have enough corn to make tortillas.." (Eber 156), describes Antonia. Menchú witnesses the children's short life-span (including that of her brother) and "bloated bellies" while working in the *fincas*: "Most Indian families suffer from malnutrition. Most of them don't even reach fifteen years old" (Menchú 4).

Both Menchú and Antonia are subject to racism by *mestizos*. Menchú was exposed to racism by the *ladinos* her people work for in the *fincas* and while she accompanied her father to Guatemala City. There, she witnessed how the staff of the Agrarian Transformation Institute treated her and her father. Her father also described the repercussions, including imprisonment, he could face should he be unable to keep the appointment. Menchú noted: "This is the world of the *ladinos*" (Menchú 32). She became increasingly familiarized to this world during her stint as

a maid for a *ladino* family in Guatemala City, during which she endured emotional abuse.

Antonia states that "They say in the past in Chenalhó there was a lot of racism. Mestizos treated indigenous people as if they were children...If we wanted to sell something, the mestizos didn't pay us what we asked. They paid what they wanted to pay" (Eber 155). Like Menchú, Antonia witnessed racism in the city and described the hostility she faced while in Mexico City obtaining her passport (Eber 155).

The Indian/*Ladino-Mestizo* binary (Beverly 89) which appears in both texts, resembles that of the Chican@/Anglo in *Borderlands*. Unlike the indigenous, the *Ladinos/Mestizos* live in urban areas and utilize the language of the hegemony, Spanish, in their daily interactions. Geographic "borderlands" are characterized by the large distance of the rural residences of the indigenous communities from the centers of power. For the Zapatistas, their autonomous townships such as San Pedro Polhó lying outside of government jurisdiction also constitute the "Borderlands."

Linguistic and cultural "Borderlands" made organizing between the various indigenous groups challenging: "...There's a conglomeration of ethnic groups, languages, customs, and traditions, and even though there are three mother languages, that doesn't mean we all understand each other...I must say it's unfortunate that we Indians are separated by ethnic barriers, linguistic barriers" (Menchú 143). Antonia did not face this problem: by sixth grade, she was fluent in Spanish and could easily communicate with those outside of her community (Eber 16-17). She would later use Spanish as a tool to help her navigate the "Borderlands" of her indigenous world and the *mestizo* world (Eber xxii).

Antonia also inhabits the "Borderlands" during her visits to the United States and becomes increasingly conscious of the disparities which lie between her and Eber. At times, Antonia's reaction is more of amusement when comparing her life to Eber's: "In my community,

there's a scarcity of water. When I came to your house, it was different. In your house, everything is inside! I don't have to go outside to get firewood to cook tortillas, to get water, to drink, or to wash....Everything is in the house! But at my house I have to walk outside in the mud..." (Eber 59). This sentiment evolves into a resentment she denies, yet is present in her words: "The equality between us isn't a problem, although as you say, you have a lot and I don't have much. But what can we do about it? You're earning here, you have a job here. I don't earn anything because I don't have a job. That's the life of Chiapanecos, no?" (Eber 161).

These indigenous communities in the "Borderlands" began to question policies imposed by the state which further marginalize this segment of the population. In Antonia's story, we have the Zapatista army combatting indigenous exclusion and oppression and creating autonomous townships where indigenous people can act as full participants in their separate society. The formation of this independent government is a type of "cultural citizenship" despite the territory residing in the "Borderlands" of the dominant *mestizo* society.

The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman of Chiapas, Mexico narrates the progression of the leadership of weaving cooperatives shifts from state-run to the women and artists themselves (Eber 124-25). Antonia participates and leads the weaving cooperatives Tsobol Antzetik and Mujeres por la Dignidad, and also helps women form their independently-led cooperatives. At an international level, Antonia participates in the International Folk Art Market in the United States (Eber 137). These efforts embody "cultural citizenship" through the use of traditional art forms as a means to gain economic independence. Antonia's involvement in the Zapatista movement also demonstrates how her people sought to create a community separate from the Mexican government which had marginalized them and a society in which they could defend themselves and have first-class citizenship. At the Zapatista intercontinental encounter, "cultural citizenship" was also embodied as participants claimed that their townships were not losing their culture.

"Cultural citizenship" also took place when the women in Antonia's cooperative were able to recover the woman symbol in their weavings following Eber's inquiry (Eber 1).

In *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the narrator describes the secretive nature of her community. Their lack of disclosure regarding their traditions to outsiders serves as an act of cultural preservation and resistance, to not be swallowed up by assimilation. Her awareness of Catholicism as a vehicle for assimilation and the deliberate use of Maya rituals serves as an act of defiance: "This is why we maintain the rites for our ceremonies. And why we don't accept Catholic Action as the only way to God... We don't want to because we know that they are weapons they use to take away what is ours" (Menchú 171).

As for the political arena, the Quiché Maya clearly state they are not only fighting for the right to full citizenship in the country of Guatemala but also in defense to continue practicing their culture without government infringement:

"Our objectives were: a fair wage from the landowners; respect for our communities; the decent treatment we deserve as a people, not animals; respect for our religion, our customs, and our culture. Many villages in El Quiché were unable to perform their ceremonies because they were persecuted or because they were called subversives and communists. The CUC championed these rights. It came out into the open" (Menchú 160).

If one were to expand the definition of "cultural citizenship" to encompass quotidian activities which demonstrate ethnic belonging (Vega 198), resistance can be observed and contextualized within the private sphere. In *The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman of Chiapas, Mexico*, Eber describes a book titled *La otra palabra* Antonia and her husband owned. The book tells the story of the massacre at Acteal in 1997 and included photos of the victims, some of which Antonia knew (Eber xv). This action is an expression of Antonia's solidarity with the

victims and their families and of her political beliefs. Other demonstrations of one's political stance are the parents' reluctance in sending their children to school because it could compromise their culture (Eber 13) and rejecting government aid intended to buy their votes (Eber 57). The following quote can exemplify Antonia's wish to remain faithful to her culture: "What matters is that I follow the traditions and serve my people, that I show respect to people and God, that I pass well over the Earth" (Eber xxv). Antonia also embodies "cultural citizenship" by continuing to cook traditional foods passed down to her by her ancestors (Eber 22) and writing a song about the governmental oppression of her people and international solidarity by alluding to the New York City Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire of 1911 (Eber 85-87).

Menchú and her community employ "cultural citizenship" by striving to preserve their culture despite the constant threats of poor living conditions and violence, which Menchú describes as a "commitment to maintain our customs and pass on the secrets of our ancestors" (Menchú 17). However, when Menchú describes how girls learn how to cook to ensure their ancestors' knowledge is passed on and how girls who have fallen into prostitution deviate from their Maya customs by wearing non-Indigenous clothing, whether or not Menchú and her people have absorbed patriarchal ideas clothed in the reasoning of cultural preservation can be debated.

Religious practices were also a vehicle for Menchú and Antonia to practice "cultural citizenship." For both women, liberation theology served as a means to maintain their Catholic identity and to participate in a religion which recognized the struggles of the working class. Menchú and Antonia were introduced to liberation theology (or the Word of God for Antonia) through their fathers. However, it was Menchú who was well aware of the subaltern perspective liberation theology embodies: "...we must create a church of the poor, that we don't need a church imposed from the outside which knows nothing of hunger" (Menchú 133).

Perhaps the most enduring example of “cultural citizenship” in a private setting (private in Menchú’s *testimonio* being the intimacy present within her community, as opposed to her personal experiences) is of the marriage ceremony. During this ritual, the couple to be wed recites a pledge to ethnic solidarity and hold the oppressor accountable for their actions:

"They make a new pledge to honor the Indian Race. They affirm our importance. They refer back to the time of Columbus and say: ‘Our forefathers were dishonored by the White Man—sinners and murderers’; and: ‘It is not the fault of our ancestors. They died from hunger because they weren't paid. If they hadn't come, we would all be united, equal, and our children would not suffer. We would not have boundaries to our land'" (Menchú 67).

While remaining loyal to their indigenous cultures and navigating the “Borderlands” of the Maya and *ladino/mestizo* world, Menchú and Antonia engage in a careful balancing of their ethnic and religious identities. According to Anzaldúa, these transmissions between cultures create a new identity, the “new *mestiza*”: “Negotiating with borders results in *mestizaje*, the new hybrid, the new *mestiza*, a new category of identity. *Mestizas* live in *nepantla*. We are forced (or choose) to live in categories that defy binaries of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Living in intersections, in cusps, we must constantly operate in negotiation mode” (*Light in the Dark* 71). Following the introduction of Catholicism in their respective communities, Menchú and Antonia embody the skilled flexibility of the “new *mestiza*” between two cultures (*Borderlands* 101).

Both women witness syncretism early in their lives. Antonia describes examples of the behaviors of her family members: “[My father] would just pray for forgiveness, because he was walking on Mother Earth, because he made her dirty. He also asked Mother Earth to give us food” (Eber 27). These actions reflect their indigenous cosmology. In comparison, “My half-

sister Angélica's grandfather always made the sign of the cross when he was walking, wherever he was walking, wherever he wanted to go," depicts a Catholic motif (Eber 27).

Menchú illustrates syncretism in vivid interpretations of her community's rituals: "...There are all the Saints' Days, from the Catholic Action. But ours are not the Saints of the pictures. We celebrate special days talking about our ancestors..." (Menchú 65). During a marriage ceremony, the Catholic saints Judas, Augustine, and Anthony are mentioned alongside the indigenous deities which in their worldview, exist on the same plane: "...They all lead to the one God, the only God, and...the saints are channels through which we communicate with the one God" (Menchú 72).

Antonia and Menchú also exhibit agency in negotiating both religions in their daily lives. Antonia describes her philosophy on fasting, which happens to break from tradition, and embodies syncretism in her practices, such as engaging in *oraciones*, the Catholic prayer, and *pox*, an indigenous ritual (Eber 168). However, Menchú's declarative statement exemplifies agency and syncretism at its apex: "By accepting the Catholic religion, we didn't accept a condition, or abandon our culture. It was more like another way of expressing ourselves...Catholic Action is like another element which can merge with the elements which already exist within Indian culture" (Menchú 80).

"Borderlands" and *Mestizaje* in Narrative Construction

In both texts, "Borderlands" make their appearance from the very beginning, at their respective introductions and interactions between the anthropologist and the informant. The Burgos-Debray series of interviews with Rigoberta Menchú were conducted entirely Spanish, which she had only learned three years prior (Menchú 1). Although Eber was familiar with the Tzotzil language, she was not fluent, and the conversations between her and Antonio were in

Spanish as well (Eber xxii). The "Borderlands" can be further extended to encompass the ethnographer/informant relationship between Burgos-Debray and Menchú and Eber and Antonia.

Although it is clear that Burgos-Debray feels deep admiration for Menchú, her commentary can also be construed as problematic. One example is Burgos-Debray's physical description of Menchú upon her arrival, noting Menchú's appearance as childlike: "Her expression was as guileless as that of a child and a smile hovered permanently over her lips" (Burgos-Debray xiv). Given Menchú's positionality, this observation can be interpreted as infantilizing. The following quote is yet another problematic example regarding how Menchú is portrayed: "But unlike the Indian rebels of the past, who wanted to go back to pre-Columbian times, Rigoberta Menchú is not fighting in the name of an idealized or mythical past. On the contrary, she obviously wants to play an active part of modern history and it is this which makes her seem so modern" (Burgos-Debray xiii). Unfortunately, this statement validates a linear progression of society from barbarism to civilization and places Menchú within this paradigm.

Eber has been conscientious of her positionality in comparison to Antonia's since the time of their budding friendship. Eber recognizes how she is indebted to Antonia and her community for allowing her to engage in fieldwork for her Ph.D. and seeks to repay the favor. Eber then assisted Antonia by selling weavings in the United States made by Antonia's weaving cooperative Tsobol Antzetik (Eber xix). Eber also provides Antonia with financial assistance, such as covering medical expenses. The borders of the ethnographer and informant were also blurred as Eber became a part of Antonia's extended family, creating the "Borderlands" of kinship. Eber is also a godmother to Antonia's son Alberto, who immigrated to the United States. Eber regularly checks on her godson's well-being via phone calls and facilitates interactions between him and his parents in Chiapas. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the "Borderlands" is also expressed in Eber's use of the name 'Antonia' as opposed to this woman's real name. However, it

is stated that Eber decided to do so in order to prevent any more hardship in Antonia's life which could result from her identity being revealed (Eber xxii).

"Borderlands" are further reproduced concerning the physical territory the two women occupy. While doing fieldwork in Antonia's home, Eber finds herself occupying the "Borderlands." Despite her and Antonia's sustained interactions throughout the years and her academic expertise on the issues which affect her friend, Eber remains unable to understand Antonia's positionality "in the flesh" (Moraga 19): "After more than twenty years of friendship and collaboration, I am still an outsider to the poverty, racism, and male dominance that Antonia has endured. This reality has created challenges for me and Antonia in working together, which we have tried to meet by talking about our differences" (Eber xx).

When Antonia is visiting the US, she navigates the "Borderlands" both successfully and unsuccessfully. Eber described how their experience at the International Folk Art Market in Santa Fe helped deepen their friendship, where they both Antonia and Eber inhabited the "Borderlands": "The market in Santa Fe opened our eyes to the struggles and hopes of artisans around the world. It also brought Antonia and me closer, perhaps because it was the first time we were alone together in unfamiliar territory" (Eber 139). Unfortunately, residing in the ontological "Borderlands" would take an emotional toll on Antonia on a separate instance: "Although Antonia says that the economic inequalities between life in the United States and her community are not that difficult for her to accept, with each visit she has deepened her awareness of the inequality between us, and I think that the injustice of this weighed heavily on her during the third visit" (Eber 161).

I, Rigoberta Menchú and *The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman of Chiapas, Mexico* can be interpreted as "new *mestiza*" texts in regards to the collaborative efforts of the ethnographer and informant, with *The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman of Chiapas, Mexico* being the most

collaborative throughout the process of constructing the narrative of the text. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* either lacks this collaborative quality since Burgos-Debray edited the final text alone, or the collaborative aspect is more nuanced since it is only Menchú's transcribed voice which narrates the story, with the exceptions being Burgos-Debray's introduction and her editorial process of arranging the story in a chronological order, making it more accessible to the reader.

In *The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman of Chiapas, Mexico*, we have Eber's experiences as an ethnographer interweaved with Antonia's *testimonio*, which helps to contextualize Antonia's unfamiliar culture for the reader, establishing Eber in the position of bridging across cultures (Moraga). In this text, Antonia's *testimonio* is constructed into the genre of autoethnography within the discipline of anthropology. Although autoethnography is used as a tool to decolonize anthropology by allowing the ethnographer to express their actions, emotions, and positionality in comparison to the informant, anthropology's colonial roots complicate this amalgam of formats, one whose origin lies in colonization, and the other in liberation.

Anthropology and *Testimonio*: A Complicated Relationship

Previous research in anthropology regarding the Latin American genre of *testimonio* has proved polarizing. Anthropologist David Stoll's inquiries into the authenticity of Menchú's *testimonio* resulting in the book *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans* prompted a highly emotional debate in the public and academic spheres, with people rushing to either side of the debate to defend or castigate Menchú for her portrayal of the Guatemalan struggle. Ironically, an anthropologist was also responsible in the creation of Menchú's *testimonio*, although Burgos-Debray's stance on the matter is one of solidarity as opposed to Stoll's intent on discrediting Menchú (Nelson 304). Burgos-Debray's ethics were also brought into question following the controversy, even by Menchú herself, claiming she was excluded

from the final editing process. While *I, Rigoberta Menchú* maintained a public profile, *The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman of Chiapas, Mexico* is a text made by an anthropologist as well, and her collaborator, 'Antonia,' is published by a university press (University of Texas Press). This text is comfortably at home within the context of an academic institution. Perhaps the most questionable elements regarding the text include its "new *mestiza*" format, a *testimonio* and autoethnography weaved together. Eber's decision to conceal Antonia's identity could also confound readers of *testimonio* expecting to hear the authentic voice of the *testimoniadora* and to be able to form an intimate bond with her. Instead, readers can find themselves more familiarized with the anthropologist as opposed to Antonia after reading the text.

Given the controversies which have risen out the production of *testimonio*, what is the anthropologist's role in this process if there indeed is still a role for them to play? Efforts have been made to decolonize anthropology by employing reflexivity, which counters the previous assumptions of the anthropologist as the objective observer. With Rosaldo's 1989 essay, "Grief and a Headhunter's Rage," which describes how the sudden, tragic death of his wife, anthropologist Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, affected him to understand the rage and grief which drives Ilongot men to headhunt, reflexivity reached its apex (Salzman 807). Similarly, anthropologists using the format of autoethnography allows for the opportunity to question their worldview and how it inevitably shapes their work. Under this paradigm, Eber's reflections could be depicted as a disclaimer—an acknowledgment of her privilege and biases to be factored into her understanding of Antonia's story.

The application of anthropological theories in *testimonio* and cultures other than the theory's original context can also prove to be a point of contention. Can Renato's "cultural citizenship," which was intended to explain the second-class citizenship of US Latinos, analyze the struggles of other communities effectively and within the worldview of said community? By

comparison, US Latinos are more privileged than the Maya people of Mexico and Guatemala. The application of this concept to this group may indeed subdue the magnitude of the indigenous Maya struggles. Furthermore, can Anzaldúa's Texas-Mexico "Borderlands" be applied to other borderlands throughout the world? By taking theories out of their original context and applying them to another culture and to a genre which grants a voice to the oppressed, *testimonio* runs the risk of being colonized.

Conclusion

“Borderlands,” “cultural citizenship,” and *mestizaje* allude to a larger story immersed in colonialism. Colonial governments impose borders in an attempt to defend their territory and to define legality vs. illegality. “Cultural citizenship” exists when people are not granted full citizenship in their society due to institutionalized marginalization. Finally, *mestizaje* in its original context was utilized to describe those of mixed ancestry and as a tool of subjugation, to legitimize the actions of the conquerors and maintain their monopoly of power in New Spain.

Although the three concepts described here are relevant to Menchú's and Antonia's struggles, it is my hope that analyzing *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and *The Journey of a Tzotzil-Maya Woman in Chiapas, Mexico* for “Borderlands,” “cultural citizenship,” and *mestizaje* do not weaken the poignancy of the narratives of these brave women and their stories of survival.

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