



Vol. 11, No. 3, Spring 2014, 326-332

Review / Reseña

Grandin, Greg. *Who is Rigoberta Menchú?* London and New York: Verso, 2011.

Invoking the Phantasm of Rigoberta

Arturo Arias

The University of Texas—Austin

The title of Greg Grandin's text appears deceiving at first. After all, the book is not truly about indigenous rights activist Rigoberta Menchú, whose testimonio *I, Rigoberta Menchú* brought her international renown and ultimately the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. It is about the Guatemala's Historical Clarification Commission (CEH for its Spanish acronym), and the uniqueness of its 1999 report titled, *Guatemala: Memory of Silence*. Grandin brilliantly and cogently dissects the CEH efforts to craft the relationship between terror and state-formation.

Given the title and the introduction, though, Grandin's text immediately evokes the question of why place Menchú's name in the title when she is not the ultimate object of his analysis but a sort of straw target dummy, operating on a different epistemic field. Why this process of resemantization? Grandin's preface offers a partial answer. He states that Verso asked him to write an introduction to a new edition (v). Simple enough. The introduction in question was never published, as Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, the compiler of Menchú's testimonio, vetoed it, empowered contractually to do so. Grandin proceeds to confirm that Burgos-Debray controlled the book's royalties and stopped paying Menchú her agreed share after their quarrel in the early 1990s (vii). He is also successful in unmasking anthropologist David Stoll's interests in discrediting Menchú with his own dire book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999), and reaffirms Stoll's colonizing discourse implying that a white American anthropologist knows more about the true nature of the Maya genocide than the victims themselves. All of this is very commendable.

After these statements, Grandin's prologue moves on to the central aspect of his book, namely, the nature of Guatemala's Historical Clarification Commission (CEH; ix-x). He presents a solid comparison between Menchú's testimonio and Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag archipelago*. Grandin finds that the latter errs more on the side of fiction than Menchú ever did, thus unmasking the condemnatory rhetoric against Menchú as knee-jerk racialized, misogynist anti-Communism lacking any fundamental sense, despite the fact that the story of the unraveling of Menchú's testimonio took place in the 1990s, *after* the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The uncanny aspect of Grandin's book is that he then returns to Menchú in his introduction following the aforementioned preface, and does so for 31 pages, compared to the 42 of the first chapter on the nature of truth commissions. This is indeed a fascinating comparative study of various instances of the inner dynamics of these international organisms that ultimately sets up Guatemala's CEH as different from what took place in Argentina and Chile. We are then exposed to the slim 21 pages of chapter two, explaining the ruling of Guatemala's CEH. The book also includes an

Appendix on the findings of the CEH (the longest part of the book, at 50 pages), and a short section on Suggestions for Further Reading.

We could very well argue that Grandin did not want to waste the solid introduction he had originally written for Verso, as explained in the preface. In part, this may also be due to the fact that he is interested in the nature of grassroots Maya leaders—and Menchú is certainly one—that emerged from the Guatemalan revolutionary process. Collectively, these leaders and “organic intellectuals” have forged a cultural memory to counteract their historical exclusion as racialized and subalternized subjects. But it seems to me that Grandin elaborates this gesture also because Menchú’s narrative possesses a justificatory episteme that articulates a symbolic meaning of experiences of suffering. Her story clearly reveals the darker side of human nature while framing her experience as moral knowledge, thus becoming a critical vehicle of self-examination through the disclosive capacity of language.

Grandin believes, and should be commended for this, that imagination allows subjects who have witnessed acts of genocide or terror to express those actions and seemingly indescribable events, within the domain of new linguistic terminologies veering away from judiciary protocols. These social narratives allow the possibility of reconstructing the causes of moral disasters, evoking the convergence of human needs of justice and psychological trauma to reconfigure new ethical perspectives. The reflexive judgment on these matters orchestrates the necessary collective efforts to comprehend the spectrum of genocide in Guatemala’s case, but also elsewhere in the world where massive human rights violations have taken place. After all, imagination enables survivors to express their indescribable experiences in their own language of survival. By adopting new linguistic terminologies that create their version of history, neologisms exhibit a human propensity to frame what has no precedent. It would seem to me that it is in this sense that Grandin chooses to deploy his reasoning of Guatemala’s CEH, placing it under the overall explicatory representation of Menchú’s experience.

In his introduction Grandin revisits the U.S. culture wars of the late 1980s and 1990s (1), and Menchú’s 1992 Nobel Peace Prize (2-3). He

retraces the Guatemala of the 1970s in which she grew up, and the nature of the Guatemalan government scorched-earth campaign leading to the Maya genocide (6), her Catholic connections, and her flight to Mexico (7-8). He then begins framing how David Stoll came to write his book aimed at destroying Menchú's reputation (8-11). Grandin's analysis is solid, compelling, and sound. About the only problem is that he seldom cites other scholars who wrote on those issues before him. There are few selective footnotes. Because of this, his discourse seems at times to craft for readers the sensation that Grandin is operating on his own in virgin territory, trekking on unknown grounds, enunciating new, untold events, when in reality he is failing to acknowledge countless scholars in U.S. academic institutions—and elsewhere in the world—who have written about these issues.

Grandin adds that subsequent research has proven that Stoll was wrong about Guatemala's civil war (18), and praises Menchú's book for its realism (19). He reproduces an important section of Menchú's interview taken directly from the audio tapes, now located at the Hoover Institution Archives, about the harrowing murder of her brother Petrocinio (23-27). He then explores her conflictive relationship with her father (28-29), before concluding his introduction by stating:

If I, Rigoberta Menchú only served as a testament of a failed revolution...it would be a good book, still worth reading. But what made liberation theology, along with Latin America's New Left more broadly, so potent a threat in a place as inhumane as Guatemala in the 1970s was not just its concern with social justice but its insistence on individual human dignity. This combination of solidarity and insurgent individuality is the heart of Menchú's memoir, and that's what makes it a great, perhaps even immortal, book. (31)

This is a truly magnificent ending to the introduction. The book then goes on, *sans* Menchú. She will only be mentioned again in the first appendix.

The ensuing chapters delve into the mundane explication of the nature and working of truth commissions. Grandin takes us through the history of their emergence in the 1960s to their consolidation in the 1980s (35). He then compares what happened in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala (38) with their respective truth commissions. Grandin claims, rightfully, that because they were run by lawyers, "truth commissions, by presenting

an interpretation of history as parable rather than as politics, largely denied the conditions that brought them into being” (37). His critique of the inner workings of the three exemplary truth commissions he chose to explore is fascinating, if a bit dry. Especially interesting is the role he delineates for Argentina’s President Raul Alfonsín, in configuring the first of the three commissions in question (41-46), who gets more credit in his narrative than writer Ernesto Sábato, the favored hero of this enterprise in Latin America’s public opinion. Grandin posits how Argentina’s ultimate choice of a “doctrine of two demons” (the political extremism of both the Left and the Right), was a very problematical compromise (46), angering those who fought “in the name of a higher ideal” (48).

Regarding Chile, Grandin criticizes how the “Rettig Commission...unlike in Argentina, was not part of a larger policy of indictments and trials” (51). Official inquiries, states Grandin, were limited to reinforcing social solidarity exclusively, underlining the weakness of its efforts. The Report, in consequence, fared not much better than Argentina’s.

Guatemala’s CEH on the other hand, not only provided evidence of social inequality (56), thus going further than previous truth commissions, but also displayed “a more vital engagement with historical analysis” (58). Grandin states, rightly, that the Maya movement pressured the CEH to examine “all of national history through the prism of racism” (58). He then revisits a good portion of Guatemala’s history that he had previously explored in his book *The Last Colonial Massacre* (2004). Grandin is equally accurate in claiming that the strongest point of the CEH Report that makes it uniquely different from Argentina’s or Chile’s truth commissions, is its “analysis of the relationship between terror and state formation” (61), the crux of his overall argument. It was this aspect what led to its conclusion that the Guatemalan military had committed “acts of genocide” (65), thus unearthing “the racist premises that motivated the 1981-1983 scorched-earth campaign” (71).

The last short chapter revisits Guatemala’s history once more, drawing on historical referents to argue the nature of the state’s racism (79), its counterinsurgency motives and genocidal intent (86), to conclude

that history provided “the legal reasoning that backed the CEH’s genocide ruling” (97). Ultimately, Grandin states that “the CEH’s innovative use of history not only distinguished motive from intent but prevented counterinsurgent justifications from mitigating the severity of the charges of military atrocities” (98). It is a strong conclusion indeed.

After reading Grandin’s book, I walked away with a great deal of admiration, but also a bit of concern. Regarding the first of these issues, the book is not only beautifully written, provides solid evidence about the obscure work of Guatemala’s CEH and how these elements make it stand out from the better-known commissions in the Southern Cone, but also has the virtue of keeping Guatemala’s unhealed trauma in the public eye. This is certainly worthy of celebration. We cannot thank Grandin enough for his ongoing efforts to revisit Guatemala’s uncanny history, which certainly stands to this day as the best trope of modernity gone wrong. I remain, however, disturbed about his use of Menchú’s figure in a book—and book title—primarily about truth commissions. Thus, I would like to raise some questions, doubts, and concerns, to conclude this review.

I understand that Grandin needed Menchú’s narrative to weigh in on the positive aspects of a singular, individual living voice enunciating human rights’ violations to balance the dryer, but more significant and ultimately more original analysis of the CEH. Thus, Grandin articulates Menchú’s disclosive capacity to frame moral knowledge and ethical problematics to make his conceit. Menchú’s narrative reveals the darkest sides of human nature without the need to offer conceptual developments. Her utterances naturally craft the disclosive-critical capacity of language. The emplotted actions she narrates unfold as stories exposing a moral substratum underneath the litany of horrors that bring to life the CEH report. In her voice, historical narratives possess justificatory epistemes that define the ways in which Guatemala’s Mayas future could be shaped. From her narration, Grandin reassess why judgment is connected to an interrelationship between ethics and aesthetics, even if he never uses the latter terms to define her discursivity. It is indeed a tribute to Menchú, acknowledged in Grandin’s long quote of the description of her brother’s death on the audiotapes. This grand soliloquy is impossible to thematize

through abstract theories. Its very reading is abhorrent due to the stark enunciation of the detailed violence performed on dying bodies. In this and other senses, Grandin's book makes a significant contribution to Guatemalan studies.

At the same time, his articulation of Menchú at this late date to forward his arguments about the nature of the CEH feels somewhat contrived. On the one hand, her name becomes a bait to attract a certain readership to his text. It thus operates as a decoy, a textual strategy. Grandin stands on fragile ground when performing this pirouette. At the same time, by revisiting Menchú's controversy, Grandin also risks appropriating her symbolic figure as a trope, a free-floating signifier, to reposition himself as the ultimate authority on Menchú's words and deeds. He should tread carefully here. Personally, I treasure his energetic contributions to making Guatemala's tragic history visible, but he should be more sensitive to the academic relations of power and control that pervade in our world. This could ultimately lead to his being read on a similar footing as David Stoll—albeit on the left—eroding his solid credibility. More than brilliant soloists, we need a chorus of voices decrying the unending nightmare that Guatemala's history continues to be emblematic of, while allowing everyone to act and speak as a fully endowed agent in documenting the complexity of its case. Luckily, Grandin not only continues to make major contributions to this history, but he also opens up a space for new approaches, new questions, and new analyses that help us find a way to move on with this arduous task, despite the grimness of the subject-matter.