2003

Close Encounters of the Third World King: Teaching *I, Rigoberta Menchu* to High School Students in Southwest Michigan

Allen Webb

Teresa Anderson

Matt Kemp

Jessica Miller

Andrea Smith

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

Recommended Citation

Webb, Allen; Anderson, Teresa; Kemp, Matt; Miller, Jessica; and Smith, Andrea (2003) "Close Encounters of the Third World King: Teaching *I, Rigoberta Menchu* to High School Students in Southwest Michigan," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 19: Iss. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1263>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

**CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE
THIRD WORLD KIND:
TEACHING *I, RIGOBERTA
MENCHU* TO HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS IN SOUTHWEST
MICHIGAN**

ALLEN WEBB

TERESA ANDERSON

MATT KEMP

JESSICA MILLER

ANDREA SMITH

Allen Webb

The vast majority of students I encounter in secondary English methods courses at Western Michigan University are of Euro-American background and from small towns and suburban communities in the lower peninsula. They are intelligent, hardworking, and dedicated students, yet many have not traveled much outside of Michigan nor, especially, outside of the United States. One of the goals of my teaching has been to try to help them gain a broader perspective and find ways to think about their teaching in an international context. One of the texts I have found helpful to this purpose is the testimonial of Rigoberta Menchu, a Native American woman from Guatemala who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 for her efforts to combat poverty, discrimination, and violence. Her story *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman of Guatemala* (Verso, 1984), has stood up to challenges as a compelling and accurate account of the life of impoverished native peoples of Central America.

As my students entered into student teaching and their first years in the profession many were drawn to using portions of Menchu's story in their own classes. While my intentions centered on teaching across cultural and economic difference and exploring the potential of personal writing, these new teachers wanted *I, Rigoberta Menchu* to do for their teenage Michigan students what it had done for them: engage their passion, expand their horizon of con-

cern, and challenge their relationship to world poverty and inequality. This article is generated from the experiences of these new teachers and written collaboratively with them. I have tried to help them tell their own stories and share the voices of their students, to examine what happens when challenging multicultural materials are brought into the high school classroom. My former students work in a variety of high schools in Southwestern Michigan and teach mostly European American students. Three are English teachers; one teaches Spanish. Their class assignments range from "at-risk" high school seniors attending an alternative high school, to suburban high school freshman, to rural and small town high school sophomores.

A long history of exploitation, intervention, stereotypic propaganda, and indifference influence the way that North Americans understand Latin America. The teachers who share their stories here attempt to make the reading of Menchu's testimonial comprehensible, meaningful, and relevant to their students. Their approach is thematic, and the topics around which they organize their curriculum — topics like the global sweatshop, discrimination, human rights, the experience of indigenous peoples, analyzing the media — lend themselves to rich and varied forms of cultural studies. In different ways and with different levels of success these teachers attempt both to help their students understand Menchu's testimony on its own terms and to connect their Michigan students to what they are reading and learning about. Reader response theory posits that the meaning of texts — or, for that matter, testimonies — is always created in a negotiation between the text and the prior knowledge and experience of the reader. As these teachers engage in a cultural studies and reader response pedagogy they listen carefully to their students, respect their viewpoints, and develop their curriculum and classroom out of student's responses and prior experiences. Further, these teachers are focused on the ethical dimension of their instruction and on the active participation of their students both in the classroom and outside it.

Teresa Anderson

When I turned eight, I started to earn money on the finca. I set myself the task of picking 35 pounds of coffee a day.... Coffee is picked from the branch, but sometimes when it was ripe and fell off the branch, we'd have to collect it up off the ground. It's more difficult to pick up than to pick from the branch. Sometimes we have to move the bush to get at the coffee. We have to pick the nearest beans very carefully-bean by bean-because if we break a branch we have to pay for it out of our wages. It's worse when the coffee bushes are young. The branches are more valuable than on the old bushes.... For two years they paid me only 20 centavos. I picked more and more coffee. It increased by one pound, two pounds, three pounds. I worked like an adult. Then finally, they started paying me more. By the time I was picking 70 pounds of coffee, they paid me 35 centavos. (34-5)

I teach a diverse population at an alternative high school in Portage, Michigan where students range in age from thirteen-late junior high-to forty-working on high school completion. Abilities and motivation also range a great deal and for many of these students life everyday is a series of real and imagined crises. Even though the class focuses on more than skill development and we address issues in these student's lives, it is hard to keep some of them from wandering out of class. Our schedule consists of four ninety-minute blocks per day — I spend some of those ninety minutes looking for my students in the hall.

I introduced Rigoberta Menchu in a thematic unit I created for the class focusing on the idea of the "Global Sweatshop." In this unit I hoped that students could begin to understand how the global economic system effects their lives. Students know how much they have to pay for the Nikes they want and they were at ease talking about shoes because the topic touches them immediately. When the students found out how much people get paid to make these

same shoes and the conditions they work in, they showed a real interest in the topic. In addition to talking about Nike shoes we also watched a short video about clothing sweatshops in El Salvador. The topic got responses like: "If we shut down these sweatshops, where are these people going to work to make a living?" I told students about co-operatives that sell native-made quality products at fair market prices.

We tied Rigoberta Menchu to global sweatshops by examining how a "sweatshop" might be in the fields as well as in a factory or textile mill. I read aloud to the class the chapter from *I, Rigoberta Menchu* "My Life is as In a Movie" which addresses the labor of the Guatemalan Indians in coffee plantations (coffee my students might drink) and the capture and torture of Menchu's brother (for resisting the oppressive system).

A short in-class writing exercise after the reading but before discussion produced responses like these:

I think that lady should have just took off and left that place. I mean what has she got to look forward to? They kill her there or they kill her trying to escape to freedom.

I feel sorry for her, all the things she had to go through, and she even saw her brother burned by a fire. What she should do is take her experiences with life and try to teach them to people who don't believe in freedom of speech or religion. What's sad is that there are people still like that on this earth.

Countries should no longer be able to beat or torture people. The United Nations should always be able to step in and tell them that if they do beat or torture someone or many people they will be handled.

What saddens me even more about this story is the lack of feeling I have. The thought, of course, sickens me that that kind of injustice still goes on in these "modern" days, but my life has been so sheltered to this kind of

violence and life-style. I can't imagine living like that; not knowing if I'll have food the next day, a house the next day, or even be alive the next day. Americans don't realize what we have. We're all so naive. I'm glad, though that I have the choice to be naive -- not thrust into such a life. Stories like this one make me a grateful girl.

After the writing we had a whole-class discussion which lasted almost an hour — for these students that, by itself, demonstrated a high level of engagement. One of my students began the discussion by telling us about her experience as an agricultural worker in the fields in California during the summer months. Though she was only seventeen, she explained to us that she had started working when she was twelve, making less than three dollars an hour at the same job for three summers in a row. She told us that she worked thirteen or more hours a day because she “wanted spending money,” and this allowed us to talk about similarities to and differences between Menchu's experience and that of my student.

As the conversation increasingly began to move back and forth between the students' experience of work in America and Menchu's experience in Guatemala, we talked about students' jobs and about those students who had never had a job. We talked about working in fast food, retail, and factories. A few of these students were working in factories at the time and I related some of my own factory experiences. We discussed the physical strain caused by field work and factory work. The young woman who worked in the fields told us of her back problems from summer labor and how these problems now effected her in her current job bagging groceries. On the other hand, I also had students who had never had a job and were instead told by their parents, “school is a full time job, and you should concentrate on that.”

These were rich and interesting class periods. Reading and discussing *I, Rigoberta Menchu* affected my students and, through an analysis of the global sweatshop, they began to make connections between

Michigan and Guatemala. It is hard to know what long term impact there may be —sometimes increased levels of interest and changed behavior doesn't seem to last even a full class period for my students. Yet, for students who struggle as mine do, focusing on the problems of others, and making connections with their own, seems valuable.

Matt Kemp

I asked my ninth grade integrated studies class in a comfortable middle-class Michigan suburb what they knew about forms of repression or discrimination existing today in societies around the world. They had learned about the Jewish holocaust in middle school and would soon be reading *Farewell to Manzanar* (about Japanese internment) in my class, but I wanted to know what they knew about more current issues. Had they heard of the “killing fields” of Burma, “ethnic cleansing” in the former Yugoslavia, issues of racism and violence in the Middle East? While this question struck up quite a bit of conversation about how people around the world were being treated, as we continued I grew concerned by my student's lack of sympathy and understanding of the lives these people were living. I knew that I was somehow going to have to deal with this carefree reaction.

After discussing Burma, Yugoslavia, and the Middle East, I decided to pose my main question, “What sort of things like this occur in our hemisphere?” The once lively discussion became a chorus of “nothin” and “I don't know.” When I saw the blank stares I recognized how effective a book like *I, Rigoberta Menchu* could be in the classroom. When I introduced it, the students showed immediate interest in a topic that was close to them. Something was happening in our backyard, and they felt like detectives searching out facts that they had previously been shielded from.

Since this book is not officially in the curriculum or on the approved reading list at our school, I couldn't purchase or assign the whole text but was only able to use certain selected chapters. I chose those that would not only be informative about the background of this peasant woman, but would

also tell a gripping episode of her life. One of the chapters was chapter 25, Menchu's account of the death of her father in the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala. The chapter is Menchu's retelling of the occurrence after gathering facts, stories, and interviews from friends who had first-hand knowledge. Along with this chapter I had student's read an article printed in the *New York Times* on February 1, 1980 covering the same event at the embassy. Their assignment was to read both the chapters and the newspaper article for the next day and be ready for a class discussion on whatever discrepancies they found between the two accounts. This was also a time for me to devise a "mini-lesson" on discrimination.

When they arrived for class the next day I was ready for them with thirteen pounds of candy (four classes). We began a discussion on what they thought of the chapter, and they immediately became involved with the textual details. They pinpointed cruelties that the indigenous people were facing. Many students were disgruntled by the fact that the Guatemalan government was not listening to the peasants or understanding the difficulties they faced.

At the same time we were discussing this topic as a class, I was also showing favoritism to certain students. A couple of days earlier I had passed out a survey to the kids. It involved simple questions that dealt with choices between two distinctly different items. Sample questions included, "Do you prefer the sports teams of University of Michigan or Michigan State?" Another question asked about physical features like eye color, hair color, and age. There were a couple of questions that were based on preferences in food, beverage, books, movies, and music. Without informing the students I used this data to segregate the class. During our little discussion I gave out candy to certain "favored" students whenever they responded. Their response didn't even need to be lengthy or 100% accurate. Whenever they spoke out they got a treat. Meanwhile the group that was being ignored by me started to get angry and hostile. When they spoke they received no candy, and during an answer I wouldn't look at them or give any form of positive feedback.

Despite the division amongst the class we continued to discuss the chapters and the newspaper article. We were slowly approaching the goal of the day: unfairness and bias. During the comparison, we identified several differences in the two accounts of the embassy takeover. Many wondered about vagueness in the newspaper article about the history of the Guatemalan peasants. They also questioned who the "officials" were that the journalist used as sources. Another detail they searched for was how a "gasoline bomb" could have been "accidentally dropped" as the newspaper reported. The word "mistreatment" was floating around the room. These ninth grade students were incredibly perceptive about what was going on in the testimonial and the newspaper article. Facts that once meant little were stirring feelings and emotions. The students seemed to be increasingly sensitized to the atrocities we were examining in Guatemala by making the comparison between the testimony and the newspaper article.

Through the manipulation of candy some of the students were also experiencing discrimination — and not liking it. After our discussion was over, I explained to the whole class what I was doing and gave all the students candy (to suppress their desire to drag me outside and cane me, which they appeared ready to do!). They agreed that it wasn't very much fun to be mistreated. I then tried to help them connect their rage to a real situation. I commented that they were ready to revolt over not getting any candy. "Now visualize yourself," I told them, "not getting enough food, shelter, and safety. If you were ready to form a revolution because of candy, what would you do if you received no food and had to fear for your own safety and survival? How would you suppress all of that rage? Or would you go to the embassy and demand change as Rigoberta's father did?"

After reading both portions of *I, Rigoberta Menchu* and a *New York Times* article their final task was to write about which source they found more credible and why. Do you believe this uneducated peasant woman?, I asked them. Or, do you believe what a major American publication reported and published? The fact that the vast majority of

student's found this [Menchu's] testimony more credible than the *New York Times* became a starting point for further investigation.

Based on my experience, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* is an excellent book to use in a classroom, however, it isn't on many high school reading lists. Why are testimonies such as Menchu's left out of the curriculum? A few students took it upon themselves to buy the book so that they could read the whole thing. Since the text was not "approved" I did not have extensive and continuing conversation about it during subsequent class periods, but I did talk with the students before, between, and after classes about what they had read. Their insights were perceptive. They commented on the poor quality of the translation, but they valued learning about Menchu's plight from her point of view. They found it an inspiring story with the capacity to touch several emotions and themes -- compassion, sympathy, trust, family bonds, anger, revolt, excitement, pride, and thankfulness for little things many take for granted. After their reading my ninth grade students wrote comments such as the following:

I noticed how the author described the oppression in El Quiche. They were all organizers who try to rally the people so the oppression won't continue. However, they are all ill-fated, because they are all either shot or burned to death, so those who remain must continue to fight. The peasants are trying to gain power so they can fight the Guatemalan government, hopefully with force. I think these actions by the government against the peasants are horrible for both and that it is very unnecessary.

This chapter is a real emotional part. When it talks about bodies that were unrecognizable and "I thought that my mother and brother were there. What I couldn't bear was the idea of them all dying together." Then she says she was the only one left and that she wanted to die. What a feeling to have, to want to die. But she desperately wanted to

go to the city even if only to see her father's grave.

I have been, to put it bluntly, disgusted. What happened to these people- and still is happening-makes me sick. No government any where in the world should have the power to do what they did and are doing.

I think it's sad how so many people were killed. It is unclear to me exactly why they were marching and why they decided to try to takeover the embassy. I also believe it was very unnecessary to have the Spanish Embassy bombed. I also don't understand how the lady didn't feel more sorrow when she found out her father was killed. The newspaper fails to mention the tragedies suffered by the people taking over the embassy. It doesn't state exactly who's giving the information. It doesn't state what the people were armed with.

The *New York Times* article gives the reader a "public" point of view while *I, Rigoberta Menchu* gives the reader a perspective from the Indian peasants. It also presents more feeling and a more clear background situation than that of the NY Times article. The article also favors the officials more than the peasants. It covers up some of the truth (peasant's perspective). The article also blames the peasants for starting the fire.

I noticed that there were a lot of people being killed or starving in Guatemala. I think it is terrible how they are being tortured and shot for no reason. I think if people helped by sending money to organizations like the one organized by Menchu's father, the people in Guatemala could get inside help. I also think the government should get involved.

In the *New York Times* article they mention five of the peasants had weapons, but in the article by Rigoberta Menchu she said that none of the peasants had any arms. Also peasants, according to Rigoberta Menchu were not holding hostages in the embassy. The article is basically on the side of the officials. I

believe Rigoberta's story is true because it fits together better. How could peasants take hostages if they only have rocks as weapons?

Jessica Miller

During my final semester of undergraduate classes, I read the testimony of Rigoberta Menchu in an English teaching methods course at Western Michigan University. Our class read Menchu's testimony from the perspective of both student and teacher. As students, we discussed her experiences in the global context of human rights. As aspiring teachers, we brainstormed ways to bring these issues into classrooms and the lives of secondary school students. As my academic concentration was Spanish language and culture, I was particularly interested in the possibility of incorporating studies on Hispanic traditions, culture, and political issues into the foreign language classroom. Our group discussions and experiences reading Menchu's testimony inspired a unit entitled *The Indigenous Peoples of Latin America* that I developed during my student teaching internship for two classes of advanced high school Spanish students.

The students participating in this project were juniors and seniors at a mid-size middle to upper class Michigan high school. Most of the students were Euro-American with the exception of one African American, one Brazilian, and one exchange student from Chile.

The activities in this unit included reading an article describing the life and work of Rigoberta Menchu in Spanish, reading excerpts from her testimony in English, collaborating with classmates on a research project and presentation in English, and writing an individual reaction paper in Spanish. My goals for the students included learning about an influential Hispanic leader, exploring diverse cultures and traditions, practicing and improving their writing, reading comprehension, and speaking skills in both English and Spanish, utilizing internet resources for research, and probing difficult issues such as human rights. My hope was that participation in the project would help students to develop social aware-

ness and empathy.

I introduced the unit with a brief presentation and discussion about indigenous peoples. Many of the students were surprised to learn that Spanish is not the only language spoken in Latin America and that hundreds of indigenous groups communicating in over one thousand seven hundred different languages also inhabit this region. My presentation contrasted groups over past centuries, noting that some built monumental civilizations while others were occupied with hunting and gathering. I emphasized the point that all of the groups do share one commonality; indigenous people all over Latin America face great pressure from the dominant society to "Westernize" or abandon their traditional ways in favor of modern conveniences and lifestyles.

During my semester abroad in Mexico, I had the opportunity to study the experiences of some of the indigenous groups of the country and to visit a rural community that preserved many of their traditional Indian ways. This experience as well the book *Mexico Profundo: Una civilizacion negada* by Guillermo Bonfil Batalla informed my presentation. I alerted students to the conflicts that exist between the white or Westernized populations, often referred to as *ladinos*, *mestizos*, or *gente de raz*, and the indigenous tribes with regard to the characteristics of "primitive" versus "civilized" societies. I noted that dominant cultures claim to act in the name of national unity when they use means such as education, evangelization, denial, violence, and the taking of land and resources to discourage indigenous groups from keeping their traditional ways and beliefs. I explained the biases that inspire derogatory expressions such as *eso es muy indio* heard in contemporary Mexican society. We explored the various means of survival for indigenous groups such as resistance, appropriation, innovation, and violence as outlined by Batalla, and I shared examples of these concepts as I had observed them in practice in the community that I visited. Students were interested in the *comal* and *molcajete*, traditional stone instruments still used to grind and prepare corn to make tortillas, and they were amused by the fact that a modern blender was appropriated by the same people to aid in the prepa-

ration of their salsa. Others were impressed by the innovative practice of using the rubber from discarded tires as soles for huarache sandals.

These means of survival entered into our discussion of Rigoberta Menchu's testimony. As we read, students identified examples of resistance, appropriation, innovation, and, of course, violence in her experiences. One young man asked, "Do they steal?", wondering if this could be defined as yet another means of survival. Students described the testimony as "sad" and "unreal." After several readings, one student expressed confusion over when the events of the testimony had taken place. Upon receiving clarification, he responded, "Oh. I thought it had happened a long time ago."

In the days that followed, students worked in groups reading and discussing an article from an advanced Spanish text that briefly described Menchu's life and work as a human rights advocate for the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. I read portions of the following chapters of Menchu's testimony aloud in English: "Chapter One: The Family;" "Chapter Two: Birth Ceremonies;" "Chapter Three: The Nahual;" "Chapter Four: First visit to the finca." "Life in the finca;" "Chapter Nine: A maid in the capital." Students also began researching and preparing a presentation on the culture and situation of a contemporary indigenous group of Latin America.

I immediately noticed that the majority of the students were more interested in the cultural aspect of the project than the political struggles in which many of their tribes were involved. In fact, the individual who assumed the responsibility of researching their tribe's relationship with the dominant culture was often the least assertive member of the group or had the misfortune of being absent the day that the assignments were handed out. Consequently, reports on culture and tradition in the group presentation were generally more thorough and showed evidence of greater thought and involvement.

Almost every group unearthed a tradition that interested the class. For example, Jessica noted that the Incans of Mexico eat guinea pigs while Alicia reported that the same tribe believes that it is a great

honor to be offered as a human sacrifice to their god. Rosita provided a wonderful overview of the language spoken by the Aymara of Bolivia and Peru, pointing out the similarities between the indigenous greeting *Winas tiris* and its Spanish equivalent *Buenas tardes*. Juanita noted that the Aymarans' extra pint of blood and increased lung capacity helped them to survive their high altitude environment. Cristina's group joked that her chipped front tooth showed that she was ready for marriage, as the Peruvian Kuna identify young women of marrying age by the shape of their teeth.

Some students added their own unique perspectives and experiences. Tim played with the first person perspective aspect of the presentation. Speaking as a Colorado Indian of Ecuador, he referred to a region on the map during a discussion on geography, but refused to "give away the true location of his people." Melinda brought in photographs of a family member who had traveled to South America as a missionary and worked with indigenous groups in the 1920s.

While the diverse traditions and beliefs of the various tribes seemed curious to the students, several expressed opinions commonly held by members of Western society. One young man noted that "change is good" and modern ways are certainly superior. "Rigoberta Menchu had two brothers that died of starvation," he noted. "They wanted to live like that?" This student related the desire to preserve customs and culture with the suffering and poverty that unfortunately often accompany a traditional lifestyle under siege. "I think anyone can get a job," he went on to say. His comment suggests limited understanding of the conditions and struggles of the poor and oppressed as well as little regard for the human need to feel autonomous and self-sufficient.

Students who researched tribal relationships with dominant cultures reported on events and political practices reminiscent of many of Menchu's experiences. Most students spoke of discrimination, denial of land and resources, treaties with governments that were broken and ignored, conflict between Indian organizations and anti-indigenous groups, and the imposition of the dominant culture through the

Spanish language. Micalina described the desire to develop a strong national identity as an excuse to “make us all the same.” There were several reports of violent activity such as the 1994 Indian uprising in Chiapas, Mexico.

Mari, our exchange student from Chile, became visibly upset while describing the current situation of the Aymara in Bolivia and Peru. She spoke of discrimination, lack of understanding, and the necessity of blending into the dominant culture. While she chose not to explain exactly what inspired her tears, I wonder if she might have identified with the situation and feelings that she described in connection with the Aymara. I wonder if she has also experienced discrimination, intolerance, and lack of understanding living as a foreigner in the United States.

Most of the reaction papers written at the culmination of the unit were submitted in the form of a letter to Rigoberta Menchu. A few students chose to write from the perspective of a member of the tribe that they had researched; only one attempted to define the role or responsibility of a country toward its indigenous groups. Very few students addressed this issue in their papers; rather, most expressed feelings of helplessness and lamented that they were unable to affect or change the poverty and oppression under which so many suffer. Most letters suggested a quiet acceptance of a world populated by “haves” and “have-nots.” Only one young woman mentioned a desire to travel to an impoverished community and volunteer her services.

The majority of writers heaped praise upon Menchu and expressed gratitude for the good fortune of living in the United States and enjoying its wealth. Menchu was referred to as an “inspiration,” a “symbol of hope,” and admired for her bravery and dedication. Students referred to themselves as egotistical, greedy, and self-centered. Many thanked Menchu for inspiring them to re-evaluate their perspectives and deal with their “little” problems.

While I was pleased with the quality of the students’ presentations, I remain a bit dissatisfied with their reactions to Menchu’s testimony and their own research. It was never my intention for students

to feel guilty or undeserving of their own standard of living, and, although many expressed shock and sadness over what they read and heard, it seemed just a bit too easy for them to accept the situation of these various tribes and groups as yet another way of the world. I wonder if perhaps young people are growing slightly immune to tragedy and suffering in the face of what they read, see, and hear everyday in the media and entertainment industries. I wonder about myself, realizing that after spending a few months in Mexico, I no longer felt the same pangs of sorrow when approached by barefoot children asking for pesos.

I am, however, convinced of the value of reading and learning from the testimony of leaders such as Rigoberta Menchu. I feel as though my students were challenged to think about an often neglected aspect of Hispanic culture as well as improve upon their communicative skills in two languages. I will continue to search for ways in which to help American students to relate what they read and hear of seemingly faraway, foreign places and people to their own experiences and realities.

Andrea Smith

In college I read *I, Rigoberta Menchu* and was so struck by her testimony that I knew I had to pass her words on and let others know about what was-and still is-going on in Guatemala. Less than a year later I had my first job: teaching English to low-skill high school sophomores in the small rural town of Coloma in Southwestern Michigan. Since I had a lot of freedom to set up my curriculum, I knew I had to include *I, Rigoberta Menchu*.

I waited until the second semester to address the testimonial because I wanted first to have a strong relationship with my students. I hoped we would all be comfortable with each other, and that discussions could be open and honest. I wanted to do the best job possible helping my students understand and feel the magnitude of Menchu’s testimony, so I asked a friend (Stephanie Werkema) who also felt passionate about Rigoberta’s story to help me teach it. If my students learned nothing else from me this year, I wanted them to at least learn to put their own needs down for

a while to help someone else, perhaps someone they didn't even know. At the same time I wanted to challenge them to question their beliefs, recognize and appreciate their freedoms, sympathize and feel compelled to act on their sympathies.

Stephanie and I decided we would read selected chapters of the testimonial aloud as students followed along. We wanted them, in some way, to get a sense that they were actually hearing Rigoberta speak. We also wanted to provide a pace that would include all of the students, regardless of their reading level. We considered it imperative that students read about some of the tortures that Rigoberta's family experienced. We knew that this part would interest them most and affect them the most powerfully. We also decided that only reading about torture would not allow our students to learn who Rigoberta is and what she stands for. So after planning and changing plans, we settled on using "Chapter VII: Death of her little brother in the finca, Difficulty of communicating with other Indians," "Chapter VIII: Life in the Altiplano, Rigoberta's tenth birthday," "Chapter XIII: Death of her friend by poisoning in the finca," "Chapter XVII: Self-defense in the village," "Chapter XXIV: The torture and death of her little brother, burnt alive in front of members of their families and the community," "Chapter XXV: Rigoberta's father dies in the occupation of the Spanish Embassy. Peasants march to the capital," and "Chapter XXVII: Kidnapping and death of Rigoberta's mother."

When I first told students about Rigoberta and that we were going to be reading about her struggle, they groaned. (I have concluded that they deem groaning as part of their job.) Indeed, very quickly as they learned we would focus on her testimony for several weeks, the groaning was replaced with gasps of disbelief and even anger. We knew we would need to introduce the testimony carefully while providing students with at least some background to help them understand it.

We hoped to dispel some of this initial resistance by filling the classroom the next day with Guatemalan clothes, artifacts and pictures of Rigoberta Menchu. The students were immediately interested in the clothing and questioned its purpose.

However, we did not divulge this information and let student interest build. To begin the day Stephanie and I decided from the start that we had to work hard at connecting Rigoberta's life to theirs, otherwise this might just be another story to them. With that in mind, we began by discussing human rights. Students identified some of their rights as US citizens such as the right to life, liberty, happiness, speech, to bear arms, etc.

Next, I asked them what it meant to be oppressed and if anyone they knew had ever been oppressed. "Oppression" was an unfamiliar word to them. After looking it up in the dictionary, many students decided that, yes, they had been oppressed. This created quite a discussion. The few students who understood the potential magnitude of the term "oppression" were disgusted to think that others considered themselves "oppressed" because their parents wouldn't let them use the car. And yet, many students felt that way. This was a question that I knew we would have to bring up again, after reading Rigoberta. We moved on to defining a list of things: civil rights, United Nations, Declaration of Human Rights, Affirmative Action, Emancipation Proclamation, Guatemala, Trail of Tears, Manifest Destiny, testimonial, discrimination, exploitation, and indigenous people. We broke students up into pairs to define these words and then we came back together as a group.

We discussed the United Nations: what it is, what it stands for, what it is supposed to do, and who belongs to it. Most of the students in this class were unfamiliar with the United Nations and the Declaration of Human Rights. So we read some of the main points from the Declaration. As I read parts, I asked them if they felt they had these rights here in America.

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights... Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. No one shall be held in slavery or servitude... No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile. Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and

favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment...”

A discussion of Spanish and Quiche words that the students would have to know before reading easily lead us into an introduction of Rigoberta and Guatemala. We began by asking students what they already knew about or what stereotypes they already had of Guatemalans, Mexicans, and/or Central America in general. As we put words like “drugs,” “lazy,” “dirty,” “alcoholics,” “poor,” “lots of kids,” “hot peppers,” “overpopulated,” “farmers” on the board, we asked students to tell us if their answer was a “fact” or a “stereotype.” Students began to realize that the stereotypes were all they knew. I suggested we could revisit this list during and after our reading.

Our next question was “Why should we care about what goes on in Guatemala?” Some students blurted out that they didn’t care. This was difficult for me to accept, but I had to remember that I had more information than they did at that point, and that understanding and sympathy was the direction we hoped to move in. Stephanie brought up the term “sweatshops.” It seemed that everyone had heard of sweatshops, but also knew little about them. Stephanie explained how children work in sweatshops long hours, sitting in the same position without air conditioning. “Where do you shop?” Stephanie asked the students and they listed off stores in the local mall. She proposed that at least one piece of clothing each student was wearing had been made in a sweatshop. Returning to them, Stephanie asked rhetorically, “So, why should we care about what goes on in Guatemala? What are we doing when we buy these clothes? Aren’t we supporting these kinds of practices?”

At this point we believed that our students were ready to start reading. We began with chapter VII (Death of her little brother...) because in this chapter there is a lot of information about how Guatemalan Indians live and work. As we discussed the chapter it became clear that students were sickened by the conditions on the finca.

As we read and discussed the student reactions seemed to evolve, and I noticed many were getting angry at the Indians for, as they saw it, not

sticking up for themselves. My students had a difficult time understanding why the native people seemed, as they saw it, “unable to help themselves.” One student questioned, “Why do the Indians continue to live in shacks with no walls or floors?” Stephanie and I began to turn their questions around, “Why would they live like that?” We trusted that the students could find answers to their own questions, and, as a class, we began to question everything Rigoberta and the Indians did. We tried to think about the situation from the viewpoint of the Quiche. In this way we found that students could better understand Rigoberta’s situation and empathize with her struggle.

The next chapter we read was “Chapter VIII: Life in the Altiplano. Rigoberta’s tenth birthday.” We started this day with a journal write. Students wrote about their most memorable birthday, or their tenth birthday if they could remember it. We went around the room and shared our birthday memories. Most were full of food, cake, and lots and lots of presents. Then we read this chapter. None of them recalled ever having a day like this, let alone a birthday.

“How can you be an adult at the age of 10?” one student asked. Others groaned at the idea of living in such a small house and snickered at the part about having sex when everyone was able to overhear it.

“Why don’t they just build bigger houses?”

“Family is most important to them, not big houses, or material possession, but family.”

“Not me, man. I can’t wait to move out!”

“Why are the Quiche so different from the ladinos in Guatemala?”

“Why do they refuse to conform to the dominant culture and ‘live in peace’?” We discussed this topic a great deal: conforming versus being your own person. In order to relate the topic to their lives we brought up school uniforms (something no student in our building is in favor of). “How would you feel if you were not allowed to wear what you wanted or to say what you wanted? Would you feel like your identity was taken away if you had to dress like everyone else?” We often had to remind students of the aspects of Quiche culture we had studied

before to get them thinking like a Quiche and not an American high school student.

The next day "Chapter XIII: Death of her friend..." sparked a good discussion when we learned that Rigoberta decided that she wanted to learn Spanish. She decided to conform. One student said "Why don't they all just learn Spanish? That way they won't get taken advantage of." Quickly, another student spoke up, "Why should they have to? They're the indigenous people."

The next day Stephanie's sister, Sara Flores and her friend Tim Bryan came to visit and share a slide presentation. Sara and Tim were both in Mexico the year before as exchange students and they worked with the Zapatista movement in Chiapas (on the border of Guatemala and Mexico). They explained to the class that the Zapatistas are going through a struggle similar to the Quiche. Sara's slide presentation included pictures of the altiplano, ancient Mayan ruins, and contemporary women's co-ops full of widowed women whose husbands had died in the rebellion. Sara and Tim brought in Mayan artifacts, clothes (huipiles), money, books, and articles on sweatshops and crimes committed by the government. Sara also talked about how there were times when she feared for her life. She was in a market place when there was a march going on, and on the tops of the buildings around her were hundreds of military men with rifles pointed at them. It was an incredible presentation and helped bring Rigoberta's testimonial right into the present moment. Afterwards students had time to interact with Sara and Tim, to look at their things and to ask questions.

Next we read the poem "Not Knowing in Aztlan" by Juanita Bell. The poem has a similar theme to Rigoberta's testimonial. Class discussion focused on how this poem related to Rigoberta and to their own lives. Several students felt the way Juanita Bell describes in her poem. As teenagers they often feel like adults are always suspiciously watching them and that they are judged differently just because of their age. So they could relate.

After reading these three chapters, students were getting a bit restless. Questions were starting to fly: "Why don't they do something for them-

selves? Why don't they fight back? Why don't they just stay on the Altiplano? Why don't they leave Guatemala? Why don't..."

Our discussion about these questions got students thinking about what was important to them. For the most part these students want to get out of Coloma, our small town. It was hard for them to understand the Quiche's commitment to their culture and their desire to stay in the place from which they come. We talked about what if the students themselves didn't have the right to go anywhere but Coloma. How would that affect them? This got them thinking. Many agreed with one student who commented, "No one can keep me here! I'll just take off!" At this point I knew they were ready to move on to chapter XVII (Self-defense in the village.)

Students were glad to see the title of this chapter. Now they thought they'd finally see a little action by the good guys. But, it ended up that the students just laughed. Living as sophomores in a high school where two guns have already been confiscated this year and fights are an everyday occurrence, Rigoberta's methods of self-defense seemed like child's play.

"Why don't they use guns?"

"Why don't they use guns?" I threw back.

"Because they don't have any and can't afford any."

"Why else? How many in this class would feel comfortable using a gun?" Only a few raised their hands and we began a discussion of how guns are viewed within the value system of the Quiche culture.

Chapter XXIV (The torture and death of her little brother...) was the chapter students had been waiting for. They love the movies with all the blood and guts. I don't think they realized at first that this chapter was going to affect them in a way entirely differently from the violent movies they were used to watching. Before we began this chapter we talked about our siblings. Who has them? What do they think about them? How do they get along? Many students couldn't stand their siblings and couldn't wait for one of them to move out. The next question I asked: "Has anyone ever feared for their life?"

Only a few raised their hands with answers of car accidents, or seeing someone else get hurt. So, we began the chapter.

It isn't far into this chapter that Rigoberta begins to describe the torture of her brother. Students were shocked. "Why are they doing that? Why don't they save him? How can someone do that to another person? How can the government do that?" Jaws were open and eyes were big during this chapter. This was no Hollywood movie, and I think they realized that fully. We didn't stop to talk about the chapter in the middle and it wasn't until the next day that we had time to discuss it. Their journal assignment was to write about what they thought about yesterday's reading. Here are a few responses:

"Yesterday when we read I would have to say it was really emotional for me. I almost cried." —Amanda Zandarski

"They must not have had any value for human life. I think I would have had to have myself killed because I couldn't and wouldn't let my family member be tortured like that. Even though my family and I aren't on good terms, I couldn't watch my own child be burned like that. I would have to die with them." —April Hunt

"You have to come to the fact that his is occurring today in Guatemala and other places. It really makes you think." —Dan Eberhardt

"This makes me want to go down there and fight with them." —Eric Moser

"Those wanna-be soldiers should be ashamed to call themselves men." —David Muellen

"Why doesn't our government step in if we know that this kind of cruel and inhumane behavior and treatment is going on?... It left a gurgling pit of ickiness in the

bottom of my stomach." —Holly Malloy

After reading "Chapter XXV: Rigoberta's father dies..." I showed students an article from *The New York Times* shortly after the occupation of the Spanish Embassy. It gave a very different account of what happened at the march. Both versions we read had their own point of view. Rigoberta's book said they marched peacefully. The first line of *The New York Times* article is, "A fire killed at least 36 people today in the Spanish Embassy, where Indian peasants had been holding the Ambassador and several others hostage..." (Feb. 1, 1980). This led us into a discussion about the media and whether we believe everything we hear, read, or, for that matter, even see. In discussing whether we believe this article we naturally moved to discussing whether we believe Rigoberta. "Can we believe everything that she says? What does she have to gain if we do?" Some students said that they believed most of what she was saying, but that she most likely embellished it a bit. When I asked them what part they thought might be embellished, they said the tortures. "I don't think that all of those things happened to her brother. I think that she was probably so overwhelmed by what she was seeing that it became more graphic than it really was."

The last chapter we read was chapter XXVII (Kidnapping and death of Rigoberta's mother). Of all the chapters this one seemed to get to them the most. Throughout Rigoberta's testimonial her mother is a stable, strong woman, and to "see" her go through this kind of torture was tough for everyone. This was her mom. They were all thinking of their own moms. "How could anyone do this to another human being especially a woman?" This was the question that they all were asking.

A few final readings we did included a poem written by Maya Angelou for the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights (this year). The poem is entitled "A Brave and Starting Truth". We also read about the Jennifer Harbury case, an American who became deeply involved in the struggle of indigenous Guatemalans.

To finish this unit on Rigoberta I asked my

students what they thought we should do. I said that I didn't want them to just write a paper and be done with it. Besides, would that change anything? My students agreed that they needed to do something. We brainstormed ideas: write letters, go down there, raise money, send supplies, etc. After reading the goals of the Rigoberta Menchu Tum Foundation, they settled on raising money for the foundation. One student wrote a letter to the head manager at Pizza Hut getting them to donate 20 pizzas and then giving us a reduced price on any additional ones we buy. Another talked to our principal and we had a fundraiser selling Pizza Hut pizza during lunch hour. We raised over \$300 to send to the foundation.

For our final exam each student had to write a letter to the Secretary of State regarding Rigoberta Menchu and her people's struggle. Some of these letters were so fantastic that I sent them off.