theories and methodologies

"Rigoberta's Listener": The Significance of Sound in *Testimonio*

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"[LOS INDIOS SON] LOS VENCIDOS POR LA CONQUISTA ESPAÑOLA, LOS QUE SE EXPRESAN HOY EN LA VOZ DE RIGOBERTA-MENCHÚ" ("THE voice of Rigoberta Menchú allows the defeated to speak"; Burgos-Debray, Prólogo 8; Introduction xi). This statement introduces the *testimonio* recorded on cassette tapes and then edited into print by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray: *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y asi me nació la conciencia* (*My Name is Rigoberta Menchú and This Is How My Consciousness Was Born*), published in English as *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*.[1] In order to hear that voice from January 1982, and to consider the important role of aurality in the text's production and later uptakes, one now has to visit the Hoover Institution, on the campus of Stanford University. Given that Menchú's *testimonio*, a genre defined by the work of personal witnessing on behalf of a collective struggling against injustice, tells the story of her community's socialist fight against exploitative labor practices and government-sponsored genocide, it might seem odd that her voice has been preserved in the archives of a right-wing think tank in the United States, some of whose fellows provided support for the government Menchú spoke against. However, the Hoover Institution has long dedicated itself to an archival counterrevolutionary practice, collecting the voices, newspapers, personal correspondence, and other documents associated with the ideological enemies of the institution's current and former fellows.[2] Moreover, the location of Menchú's tapes makes some historical sense. Many today will recall that Stanford University, the Hoover Institution, and Menchú were at the center of what has since been called the Rigoberta Menchú controversy (Arias), in which the text galvanized culture war debates when progressive faculty members included *I, Rigoberta Menchú* on syllabi to diversify the curriculum. Right-wing pundits railed against the inclusion as an example of "affirmative action for books" (Dinesh D'Souza qtd. in Strauss) and denounced Menchú's *testimonio* after the Stanford PhD and anthropologist David Stoll revealed that it included several inaccurate statements.

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The Menchú tapes became part of the controversy when Peter Canby, the former head of fact-checking at *The New Yorker*, questioned Stoll's own accuracy, wondering why Stoll had not listened to the eighteen hours of tape recordings that Burgos-Debray made with Menchú to produce the book. Stoll responded:

> Now that I have been able to listen to the eighteen hours, I am pleased to report that they bear out my earlier conclusion, as well as the most recent of Menchú's own statements, that this is indeed her story. In view of Burgos-Debray's explanation that she shifted Menchú's episodes to maintain chronology, what most surprised me about the tapes is how closely Burgos-Debray ended up following them in the book.

The tape archive, Stoll suggested, proved that the indigenous activist Menchú, not her Euro-American editor, spoke for herself and misrepresented the facts.

The following rejects the project initiated by right-wing writers to debunk the force of Menchú's *testimonio* and their interpretation of inaccuracies on the tapes—Stoll, it should be noted, understates the editor's interventions—but wonders what it would mean to listen to these tapes now. Does the medium matter in the history of *testimonio*? In a genre so identified with the "voice of the other," why have critics insisted that *testimonio* is a "printed as opposed to acoustic form" (Beverley, "Margin" 24)? Why were so many of the tapes used to write *testimonios* never made available to researchers or the listening public? And what might the study of sound and aurality contribute to our understanding of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*? In asking these questions, I have no interest in readjudicating an old controversy.[3] Nor am I arguing that the highly mediated sounds of a tape-recorded voice represent an authentic, genuine, or real voice; a singular identity; or an amorphous affective unity. Nor am I embracing a poststructuralist approach to vocal sound that would insist, ultimately, that sound is a surplus or a "nonsignifying remainder" (Dolar 36).[4] Rather, I want to think with this most famous of *testimonios* to consider what generations of scholars and practitioners might have missed by treating *testimonio* tapes as mere material, ignoring the semiotics of sound alongside those of print, abstracting a speaker's voice into the metaphor of the voice, and failing to attend to the role of the listener and aurality with as much care as the entextualized voice of the speaker.

Asking these questions in this way already draws on methods from the fields of linguistic anthropology, sound studies, book history, and media theory that estrange, denaturalize, or unsettle the objects that literature scholars tend to take for granted, and even the very category of literature itself. The term *entextualization*, for instance, describes the process by which an object (a cassette tape, a rock, a personal letter with the remains of a grasshopper) becomes a specific type of text (a testimonial book, the Rosetta stone, a poem by Emily Dickinson).[5] *Entextualization* likewise names various decisions about media and meaning made along the way—that a *testimonio* should be a book instead of an audio recording; that the three sets of inscriptions on the Rosetta stone should be transferred to a page by means of rubbings and then treated as equivalent languages; that Emily Dickinson's letters should be thought of as poems to be set down in standardized type, in stanzas with line breaks, and free of any material object like the grasshopper—that relate to specific ideologies about what counts as worthy of literary attention, the appropriate medium for a "literary object," and the institutionalized modes of reading associated with such objects (Lucey, "A Literary Object's Contextual Life"). Combine these concerns with those of scholars who have turned to aurality, or listening practices in sound studies, to describe how the way one listens can determine everything from the authenticity to the per-

sonhood to the racialization of a sound, and one begins to understand why aurality matters for a genre that mutes the sounds of its speakers and erases the role of its listeners in moving from tape to text.[6]

These methods seem especially relevant in *testimonio*, where the compilers or editors who recorded the voices of their subjects felt it necessary to turn to tape and then transcribe those tapes into print rather than have them edited by sound engineers and released as audiobooks or radio documentaries. Analysis of the tape-to-text process is especially appropriate in the case of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, where Burgos-Debray emphasizes Menchú's voice and its sound by situating herself "a la escucha," as "Rigoberta's listener" (Prólogo 20; Introduction xxi). In the book's introduction, for instance, she instructs readers to "seguir su voz" ("follow [Menchú's] voice"), claiming, "es necesario oír la llamada de Rigoberta Menchú, y dejarnos guiar por esa voz tan singular que nos transmite su cadencia interior de una manera tan encantadora, que a veces se tiene la impresión de oír el tono, o sentir su aliento" ("That is why we have to lsten to Rigoberta Menchú's appeal and allow ourselves to be guided by a voice whose inner cadences are so pregnant with meaning that we actually seem to hear her speaking and can almost hear her breathing"; Prólogo 9; Introduction xii). While we can acknowledge these passages as classic examples of phonocentrism, the privileging of speech over writing, we can also take them to exemplify the abstract way everyone from narrative theorists to psychoanalytic critics writes about the voice, ignoring its sonic affordances and not using the more specific term *register*, which describes how vocabulary and syntax index social positionality to allow readers to connect speech patterns with particular types of speakers—indigenous activists, academics, sports announcers, or other "social personae" (Agha 39). Rather than repeat those imprecisions, we should recognize how tropological notions of the voice, what Nicholas Harkness calls "voicing," connect with the physiological sounds produced by a voice, what Harkness names "the voice voice," in order to consider how vocal meaning depends on "the phonosonic nexus" (12). We can hear this work in the sounds of the Menchú tapes, but first it is important to understand the meaning of tape itself and its role in how we hear those sounds' meanings.

Tape matters for *testimonio*, in part, because its media history helps produce what readers presuppose is an authentic utterance that indexes reality.[7] While sound studies scholars are undoubtedly right to assert that what distinguishes tape from previous sonic media like the phonograph is tape's ease of manipulation—the ability to cut, splice, overdub, and erase—the cultural uptake that shaped tape's meaning for large-scale publics in the Americas in the 1960s and 1970s connected tape to a physical, evidentiary archive of truth.[8] In other words, it did not matter to most people that William S. Burroughs was cutting up and editing tapes and theorizing how their manipulation could produce false testimony to take down the government.[9] Courts, Congress, and the public believed in tape's evidentiary quality enough to indict President Nixon during the Watergate scandal when he refused to release tapes of his conversations. Despite the medium's manipulability, then, its history made the public believe in its veracity.

This belief emerged from a sonic past. From the 1950s to the 1970s, when the cultural groundwork was laid for the emergence of Menchú's *testimonio*, tape's meaning—as a medium that could faithfully archive evidence—drew from specific technological affordances, such as its physical capacity to reproduce the sounds of speech, that intersected with cultural beliefs about tape's truth value, which owed as much to the history of media as to the particularity of tape.[10] Beginning with nineteenth-century media like

photography, which registered the physical trace of light on photosensitive paper, or phonography, which transduced the physical vibrations of sound waves, like a speaker's voice, onto a wax cylinder, the material transformation of one object into another created new faith in the indexical capacity of mechanical technologies to register reality seemingly without the interference of human symbolic systems. Building on these beliefs in the 1950s and 1960s, the age of high fidelity introduced magnetic tape alongside stereo and multitrack recording to isolate sound in greater detail, increasing the definition and precision of reproduced sound to the point that hi-fi enthusiasts, and the marketers that sold products to them, trusted that taped sound could be equivalent to an original source.[11] (The belief in tape's physical fidelity received its most iconic treatment in the 1970s through a series of Memorex cassette tape commercials featuring Ella Fitzgerald, in which her recorded voice shattered a glass accompanied by the tagline "Is it live or is it Memorex?" [Mercer].)

By the time Burgos-Debray decided to tape-record her conversations with Menchú in January 1982, the cultural, political, and legal associations between tape and truth had been secured. This history matters for understanding how sound shaped readers' uptake of the text as a document of lived reality and contributed to the political and cultural power of *testimonio* to access, or create, the authentic voice of a subaltern or marginalized speaker. However, if one does not listen for accuracy, authenticity, or evidence, what can one hear on Menchú's tapes? While we might, as I and others have done elsewhere, use melodic transcription, sonic spectography, pitch-tracking software, and reception histories to make the sounds of a voice legible in different ways, in the remainder of this essay, to better contextualize aurality's impact on the production of meaning, I will consider Burgos-Debray's role as Rigoberta's listener (McEnaney, "This American Voice"; MacArthur; Rings).

The recordings, after all, open with Burgos-Debray in the position of ethnographer and psychoanalyst administering the talking cure as audile technique:

> Vamos a empezar a hablar. Lo que me gustaría es que me cuentes todo lo que te viene a la memoria—las imágenes que te surgen—sobre tu infancia, sobre tu vida para así pues poder comenzar y continuar la conversación. Pero no te cortes. Todo lo que te venga a la memoria, todo las imágenes y recuerdos. Me gusta mucho una frase dijiste ayer que cuando aprendiste el español. Quisiera que hablaras un poco de tu vida cuando aprendiste español.
>
> (Menchú, Interview [cassette 1])

> We're going to start talking. I want you to tell me everything that comes to mind—the images that you remember—about your childhood, and about your life so that we can begin and continue the conversation. But don't stop speaking. Everything that comes to mind, all the images and memories. I really liked what you said yesterday about when you learned Spanish. I'd like you to talk a little bit about your life when you learned Spanish.[12]

She begins with a shared command: "We're going to start talking." Yet the phrase is delivered casually and quietly, a subtle way to direct them to the task at hand. These phrases do not appear in the book. They are editorial directives that shape the answers they anticipate. They establish the importance of speech—we're going to talk, don't stop talking, talk about your life—as the fulcrum for the conversation. Burgos-Debray, as metadiscursive as other Parisians who consider Paris the intellectual center of the world—"París les sirve de caja de resonancia. Todo lo que se hace en París tiene una repercusión mundial, comprendida en ella la América Latina" ("Paris is their sound box. What happens in Paris has repercussions through the world, even in Latin America"), she comments in the introduction (Prólogo 16; Introduction xviii)—opens the conversation with talk about talk.

The book begins otherwise: with Menchú's words. Explaining why she erased her own words from the manuscript, thereby transforming a dialogue into a monologue, Burgos-Debray writes, "Situarme donde debía estar: en primer lugar estar a la escucha y permitir a Rigoberta hablar, a continuación ser el instrumento, una especie de doble de Rigoberta, que haría el pase de lo oral a lo escrito" ("By doing so I became what I really was: Rigoberta's listener. I allowed her to speak and then became her instrument, her double, by allowing her to make the transition from the spoken to the written word"; Prólogo 20; Introduction xxi). However, erasing the questions creates a certain tone on the page. Menchú's response, highly edited, seems like a powerfully simple and spontaneous declaration of identity: "Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú. Tengo veintitrés años. Quisiera dar este testimonio vivo que no he aprendido en un libro y que tampoco he aprendido sola ya que todo esto lo he aprendido con mi pueblo y es algo que yo quisiera enfocar" ("My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I am twenty-three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life, it's also the testimony of my people"; *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* 30; *I, Rigoberta Menchú* 1). The style seems a product of Burgos-Debray's ear more than Menchú's voice. In an almost parodic performance of the Parisian anthropologist in awe at a projected third world authenticity, Burgos-Debray admires her speech as "verdadero y simple" ("simple and true"; Prólogo 9; Introduction xiii), much as the book's English-language translator praises "this spontaneous narrative" for its "vitality, and often beautiful simplicity" (Wright vii). Menchú's opening response on the tapes, however, is spoken in a shy, low volume, with a slow, but continuous cadence that is distinct from the paratactic tone of assurance Burgos-Debray creates on the book's first page:

> Yo creo que, esto, muchas veces me cuesta mucho de recordar de todo la, una vida que he vivido, pues muchas veces hay tiempos muy negros y hay tiempos que sí se goza también, pero lo importante creo que quiero hacer un enfoque que no soy la única, pues lo que he vivido ha vivido mucha gente, y es la vida de todo un pueblo, la vida de todos los guatemaltecos pobres, y trataré de narrar un poco mi historia. (Menchú, Interview [cassette 1])
>
> I believe that, this, sometimes it's really difficult for me to remember everything, the, a life that I've lived. You know, there are a lot of dark times and there are also happy times, but the important thing is that I want to focus on the fact that I'm not the only one. You know, what I've lived through has been experienced by a lot of other people. It's the life of an entire community [*pueblo*]. The life of all poor Guatemalans. I'm just going to try to talk [*narrar*] a little about my life.

It is worth noting how Menchú opens with resistance, the difficulty of remembering, and a more tentative attempt to tell her story than the emphatic "this is my testimony." Moreover, while Menchú follows this statement with the assertion that it is difficult both to remember the suffering she has experienced and to speak Spanish, the transcribed words run counter to the sound of her voice: her easy pronunciation; her fluid, if sometimes grammatically awkward, speech; and her general lack of hesitation in delivery. In comparing the opening page of the book with corresponding sections of tape—and it should be noted that Burgos-Debray edits generously, connecting sentences ten minutes apart—we can hear how printed text and spoken recording depart from each other, how sound adds meanings not captured on the page, and how Burgos-Debray's editorial decisions alter the tone of Menchú's words.

Indeed, the words in that first paragraph largely derive not from the first tape but from the second, recorded a day after the transcription above (Menchu, Interview [cassette 3]).

The surprise is that, up until that point, instead of Menchú's voice we hear not Menchú, but a young child shyly declaiming poetry in French before bursting into songs about snails, apples, hunchbacks, and Santa Claus, playing with the distance between herself and the microphone, shouting and whispering, and listening to two older women wash dishes in the background.[13] Then, abruptly, the sound cuts out and starts again with Burgos-Debray prompting Menchú to speak about herself, her age, and her culture. No longer can we hear Menchú's opening lines as if they appear from nothing, with the force of creating oneself through speech. Likewise, the references to Menchú's childlike demeanor in the book's introduction make little sense on the tapes, where she speaks with an even pitch, her composed voice contrasting sharply with the ebullient child that preceded her. Moreover, when Menchú responds to Burgos-Debray's first prompt with a quiet laugh, a pause, and a brief request for clarification, she punctures the "spontaneous" spirit attributed to her delivery in the book's introduction. These scenes reveal Burgos-Debray as Rigoberta's listener from another angle, as an authorial listener whose questions, along with the mediation of the tape recorder, participate in the entextualization of Menchú's voice. Sound does not heighten the authenticity or transparency of her voice, as the poststructuralists feared and her progressive advocates desired, but rather reveals different aspects of sensuous mediation and meaning making.

Similar scenes of sonic intimacy abound across the tapes, reinflecting the text's meaning. The contrast between the domestic sound of cutlery scraping along plates and the sound of Menchú quietly and steadily describing how the government burned fields, villages, and their inhabitants underscores the loss (Menchú, Interview [cassette 16]). And, in a moment overburdened with meaning, as the two discuss Quiche ritual, Menchú suddenly breaks off from Spanish and begins speaking a prayer in Quiche before the tape stops. The text makes no mention of this difference, and when the tape begins again, Menchú attempts to translate what she said into Spanish. She pauses for ten seconds, as if searching for the right word before, prompted slightly by Burgos-Debray, Menchú breaks the silence: "culto."[14] In context, the word refers to religious ritual, although it also carries connotations of education and culture. For a literary scholar trained to obsess over the meaning of words, the scene sounds like an allegory of *testimonio*, an encounter between competing concepts of culture, a reflection on the ritual power of language. And yet such an attempt at close listening might be the wrong way to listen here, a technique that would fold text back onto tape. Rather than a reading of the word alone, our attentive listening should make us consider our own roles as Rigoberta's listeners, the ongoing processes that make meaning out of the sound of her voice on tape, and the different modalities of tape and text now audible.

Notes

1. For more on the politics of the title's translation—from the emphasis on political consciousness raising in Spanish to the focus on ethnic identity in English—see McEnaney, "Forgotten Histories." Space constraints prohibit me from discussing additional significant discrepancies between the Spanish-language text and its published English translation. Beverley explains that the use of tape recording in *testimonio* is necessary because the narrator is either functionally illiterate or not a professional writer and because the assumed lack of writing ability produces a truth effect ("Margin" 26–27).

2. The Hoover Institution's fellows include George Shultz (the secretary of state under Ronald Reagan during CIA-backed massacres of indigenous activists in Guatemala), Condoleezza Rice (the former national security adviser and secretary of state during the torture years of the George W. Bush administration), and H. R. McMaster (the former national security adviser for Donald Trump). See Alterman; Henriksen; "Guatemala Genocide."

3. See Beverley, *Latinamericanism* for more on this ongoing debate.

4. Dolar headlines a group of poststructuralist scholars of voice that includes Nancy, Cavarero, Chow, and Butler. Their arguments ultimately rely on the structure of poststructuralist thought, a method that converts sound, voices, listening practices, and so on into the same repetitive logic of difference. For these scholars, the phonosonic nexus cannot exist, because physiology and sonic materiality are no more than nonsignifying objects, supplements and residues that might disrupt any referential signification, but only to reassure us that their own system and logic will not be challenged.

5. On the Rosetta stone, see Allan; on Dickinson, see Jackson. Other notable literary scholars who borrow from linguistic anthropology's concept of entextualization are Lucey, *Never Say I*; Warner.

6. Against the long tradition that understands oral cultures to exist before others—as if speaking excluded other sensory regimes and modes of organizing knowledge—and describes them as inherently collective, ancient, primitive, mnemonic, or irrational, opposing them to lettered cultures, scholars like Sterne (*Audible Past* and "Theology"); Ochoa Gautier; and Stoever have issued correctives that both complicate any such binaries as fantasies and turn attention to aurality as a critical position from which sounds are adjudicated as speech (*logos*) or mere sound (*phōnē*), music or noise, human or nonhuman.

7. I am not claiming that taped voices are authentic or real, but that tape's cultural history has produced this belief. See McEnaney, "Forgotten Histories."

8. For more on the difference between tape and the phonograph, see McMurray; McEnaney, "No Transmitter" and *Acoustic Properties*. For a theory of tape's indexical capacity from this time period, see Costa and Perreault. For a discussion of Costa's work with tape in relation to indexicality, see McEnaney, "Real-to-Reel." For other discussions of tape and how it was manipulated at this time, see Peraino; Braddock and Morton; Stoever-Ackerman.

9. The same year that Menchú's *testimonio* was published, the British anarcho-punk band Crass released a hoax tape that spliced together Ronald Reagan's and Margaret Thatcher's voices to sound as if they were conspiring without regard for laws or lives in the war of the Islas Malvinas, or Falkland Islands. The tape did not take down the United States or British governments, but it was reported on credibly by *The San Francisco Chronicle* and other newspapers.

10. For more on the relation between tape and *testimonio*, see McEnaney, "Forgotten Histories." Pratt's vocabulary regarding *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* is notable for the way her praise wittingly or not draws from sonic history when she comments on "what one might call the historical fidelity of the book" and "the book's overall accuracy" (41).

11. For more on the difference between definition and fidelity, see Chion. For a historically informed critique of the concept of fidelity, see Sterne, *Audible Past*. On the rise of the culture of high fidelity, see Keightley.

12. All translations from the tape recordings are my own.

13. I am thankful to Antoine Traisnel for help identifying the various French children's songs.

14. An aside from Menchú just before she recites the prayer adds to the complexity of language use at this point in her *testimonio*. She says, "Es un mundo diferente, pues no se refiere tanto a la realidad, pero, sin embargo, lleva, lleva parte de la realidad que vivimos" ("It's a different world. It doesn't necessarily refer to reality, but, nevertheless, it conveys part of the reality that we live"; Interview [cassette 1]).

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