THE LITERATURE IN MENCHÚ'S TESTIMONIO AND THE TESTIMONIO IN ANZULDUA'S LITERATURE: WORDS AS WEAPON

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ABSTRACT: Based on some of the definitions of testimonio as a genre this paper compares the works of Gloria Anzaldúa and Rigoberta Menchú, two authors who share an Indian heritage and who seem to function as mediators between the worlds of those they see as the oppressors and the oppressed. This paper looks directly at "Menchú's Testimonio", an oral account of the atrocities she experienced in Guatemala in the 1980's made into a book by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray and some excerpts of the works by Anzaldúa, a writer and theorist who had to learn to live surrounded by prejudice against Mexican descendants living in the Texan-Mexican border. The main objectives of this paper are: a) identify the implied readers of their texts; and b) examine the role of literary elements in their narratives.

KEYWORDS: Anzaldúa; Menchú; Testimonio.

RESUMO: Com base em algumas das definições de testimonio como gênero literário, este artigo compara as obras de Gloria Anzaldúa e Rigoberta Menchú, duas autoras que compartilham uma herança indígena e que parecem funcionar como mediadoras entre os mundos daqueles que elas vêem como opressores e oprimidos. As discussões apresentadas neste artigo baseiam-se diretamente no "Testimonio de Menchú", um relato oral das atrocidades por ela testemunhadas na Guatemala na década de 1980, transformado em um livro escrito por Elisabeth Burgos, Debray, e alguns trechos das obras de Anzaldúa, escritora e teórica, que teve de aprender a viver cercada pelo preconceito contra os descendentes de mexicanos que vivem na fronteira do Texas com o México. Os principais objetivos deste artigo são: a) identificar os leitores implícitos de seus textos; e b) analisar o papel dos elementos literários em suas narrativas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Anzaldúa; Menchú; Testimonio.

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1. INTRODUCTION

> This land was Mexican once,
> was Indian always
> and is.
> And will be again.[2]

When I first came across some of the excerpts of Gloria Anzaldúa's work I immediately made a connection with some of the texts on Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio. Although the two women lived different lives (Menchú as a popular leader in a small Quiché Indian village in Guatemala and Anzaldúa as an academic in Southern Texas) it seems that they share a past - the ancient past of Indian civilizations and their struggle since the Spanish conquest. But it is not simply a past, it is a past that echoes in the present – their narratives take place in the present perfect and are intertwined with expectations for a future free from discrimination. They both talk of rape, of violence and war against their people and at times it is difficult to precise the period that is being described. Therefore, the narratives seem to have a common ground.

Besides sharing this timeless ravaged Indian heritage, both Menchú and Anzaldúa, through their narratives, seem to function as mediators between the worlds of those they see as the oppressors and the oppressed. On the basis of such mediation, I intend to verify with this article a) who are the implied readers of their texts, and b) what possible role literary elements play in their narratives.

It is not my objective to discuss herein all the aspects of the murky nature of testimonio as a genre, therefore, I will borrow some of del Sarto and Herbert's[3] broader definitions of testimonio to support my view on Anzaldúa's narrative as a type of testimonio. Among other definitions, the authors present testimonio as being 'based on traumatic historical and/or social episode(s)', and being 'told from an individual perspective'. However, this 'individual' does not necessarily mean it is an autobiography, as Arias (2001) points out, 'Testimonio was never meant to be autobiography or a sworn testimony in the juridical sense; rather, it is a collective, communal account of a person's life.' (76). He goes on to say that in the 1980's, testimonio implied the logic of 'collective political action' with a formative influence.

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[2] From *El otro México/The Homeland, Azltán* by Glória Anzaldúa.
[3] Del Sarto, Ana; Herbert, Laura. 'Testimonio and Argentina: a reclamation of historical space. Available in: http://digitalunion.osu.edu/r2/summer06/herbert/index.html

In Menchú's case, where the narrative is undoubtedly looked at as testimonio, these episodes were orally narrated in Spanish to anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray who translated it into a book. Although Menchú's narrative is told from a personal perspective, in the first lines of her account she states that the story is not only the story of her life: "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" (MENCHÚ, 1986: 01). With regards to Anzaldúa's narrative, and looking at testimonio with this broader view, it is possible to see that it is also a personal account of someone who considers herself as a borderlands dweller and who states to have a "almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows…" (ANZALDÚA, 1987: 19).

The borderlands, so much a part of Anzaldúa's work, are not only the physical border between Mexico and Texas, as she defines "the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (idem). Therefore, Anzaldúa's concern is not only with the discrimination against Chicano[4] culture but also race, class, and gender discrimination.

Before trying to answer the questions posited in this introduction, for which I will be looking mainly at some critical papers on Menchú's testimonio, the testimonio itself, and into a few excerpts of Anzalduá's work, in the next topic I will touch briefly upon the concept of *transculturation* as it will serve as a connector between Menchú and Anzaldúa's quest to preserve their forefathers' legacy and the strategies they use to do so.

2. TRANSCULTURATION

Many Latin American thinkers, such as Fernando Ortiz, José Vasconcelos, Rubén Dario and José Martí, to name but a few, have used the term *transculturation* to discuss how cultural differences in the often conflicting relation between colonizer and colonized are dealt with. The term, as pointed out by Pratt (1992: 229), was coined in the 1940s by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz, who used it when describing the Afro-Cuban culture, as a replacement for the terms *acculturation* and *deculturation* that described 'the transference of

[4] The word probably dates from 1930/40 when poor rural Mexicans, often native Americans, were accepted in the United States to work as cheap labour following agreement between the two countries. Having a discriminatory connation at first the term was appropriated by Mexican-American activists in the 60s and 70s and is now widely used although not fully accepted by those Mexican-Americans who are integrated into American society and do not wish to be linked to the idea of a new identity for their culture. (source: http://academic.udayton.edu/race/01race/chicanos.htm).

culture in reductive fashion imagined from within the interests of the metropolis'. Since then the term *transculturation* has been used by ethnographers to describe

> how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from material transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture'. While subjugated people cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for. (idem: 6)

The author carries on to assert that *transculturation* is a phenomenon of the 'contact zone', which is described as a space of colonial encounter where people geographically and historically separated meet and establish ongoing relations. However, such relations are not based on equality neither are they conflict-free. Pratt compares the societies within the 'contact zone' with the chaos and lack of structure commonly attributed to *contact languages*, as known in linguistics, from which she borrows the term 'contact' – which are improvised languages used in the communication between people of different native languages, and which receive the name *Creole* once they have native speakers of their own. An important aspect of the 'contact zone', according to the author, is that the relations between colonizers and colonized are not of separateness but of interaction, of exchange, where 'subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other', even though often happening within asymmetrical relations of power.

Beasley-Murray[5] points out that when applying the concept of *transculturation* to literature, the modernist Uruguayan writer and literary critic Angel Rama states that it is an idea connected to the drive for autonomy and cultural independence, a step towards 'constructing a broad literary system, a field of integration and mediation that would be functional and self-regulated". However, Beasley-Murray argues that the attempt to build an autonomous literary system runs the risk of becoming a new state system, which can initiate new parameters of intellectual dependency. Having said that, the author believes that the call for autonomy coming from modernist intellectuals are still relevant in post-modernist days.

As an approach to describe the ongoing complex relations of power between the colonizers and colonized, *transculturation* goes much further than this overview as a bettered alternative for terms such as *acculturation* and *deculturation* or its proposed application to literature. However, for the objective of this paper, this quick summary shall suffice, as previously mentioned, to be used as a base for a brief discussion of Menchú and Anzaldúa's ways of dealing with the cultural differences that are a natural background in their lives.

[5] BEASLEY-MURRAY, Jon. "The Intellectual and the State: Modernismo and Transculturation from Below". 2008. Available in: <http://faculty.arts.ubc.ca/jbmurray/research/transculturation.html>. Access in: 04 nov. 2009.

Before doing that, I shall be looking next at Menchú and Anzaldúa's narratives to suggest their implied addressees and the role of literary elements in their writing.

3. IN MEMORY OF THE FOREFATHERS

In order to try to find Menchú's and Anzaldúa's possible addressees, it is necessary to establish who fit into the category they see as the oppressor and oppressed, which I shall do by evoking the cultural environment where both women were born and raised.

From the beginning of her account, Rigoberta Menchú (1986) makes it explicit that her people must struggle against the *ladino*[6]. However, once she starts to get contact with Indians from other villages and eventually with *ladinos*, she points her gun directly at the wealthy, landowner *ladinos* and those holding power: 'That *compañero* taught me many things, one of which was to love *ladinos* a lot. He taught me to think more clearly about some of my ideas which were wrong, like saying all *ladinos* are bad'. (165).

For her, the discrimination she denounces is a result of the *ladino* minority's belief that they are superior to the Indian population, and who, she says, see her people as 'a sort of animal' (167). Being a tireless defender of everything to do with her ancestors, this minority of wealthy and powerful *ladinos* is clearly the oppressor she feels they must fight against. She dedicates great part of her testimonio narrating the atrocities the indigenous population has to face in the hands of the Guatemalan Government, led by *ladinos*, and the police force; and their heavy-handedness against them and other poor Guatemalans. Mixed with Menchú's description of Maya's tradition and experience, the reader is given a bleak account of the 1980's Guatemalan scenario, when, according to Arias (2001: 77), an estimated 150000 Mayas out of a population of 5 millions were either killed or 'disappeared'.

As for Anzaldúa, although born and brought up in American soil, she describes her infancy full of Mexican references, leaving no doubts about the importance of such references in her way of living and thinking. Among the many adjectives she uses to describe herself, the one that is always missing is that of an American. Having lived surrounded by prejudice, her Chicano identity comes up stronger than anything else, and the awareness of her Indian ancestry is widespread in her writing. When talking about her mother's attempts to keep her away from the derogatory image of a 'dirty Mexican', for example, she points out that 'it

[6] In Menchú's book, *ladino* is described as "any Guatemalan – whatever his economic position – who rejects, either individually or through his cultural heritage, Indian values of Mayan origin. It also implies mixed blood" (249).

never dawned on her that though sixth-generation American, we were still Mexican and that all Mexicans are part Indian'. (KEATING, 2009: 38).

Although Anzaldúa clearly sees the dominant white culture as the oppressor, stating that the white man only splits 'people of color' in order to weaken them and 'whitewash' and distort history, she does not believe that the white man is the only one to blame for all the existing prejudice against Chicano culture, as she sees the latter passively accepting and repeating the attitudes of the former.

> Its difficult for me to break free of the Chicano cultural bias into which I was born and raised, and the cultural bias of the Anglo culture that I was brainwashed into adopting. It is easier to repeat the racial patterns and attitudes, especially those of fear and prejudice, that we have inherited than to resist them. (KEATING, 2009: 48).

Although Rigoberta is not as assertive as Anzaldúa's in denouncing acceptance of whatever is imposed on the oppressed – her testimonio rather emphasizes the pressure upon her people – she does describe an environment of resignation that gradually changes once key community members start an awareness work around the villages.

Before the publication of her testimonio, Rigoberta fulfilled her role as one of these key community members by spreading her message of resistance by visiting different villages, risking her own life in the process. Thus, for her the oral language, the same lent to Burgos-Debray for the book, was the most appropriate way to get the message directly to her own people. With the book, an element of Western discourse, she managed to widen her addressee spectrum so that the outside world could learn of the genocide in Guatemala and lend support to end it.

Anzaldúa, on the other hand, makes exclusive use of the written word to call upon an end to discrimination. But her writing is not aimed only at the academy. There are enough elements in her narrative to assume that she fires at all directions. Her academic writing is harmoniously sewed with both English and Spanish words that recount the richness of her forefather's culture, its merciless destruction by the hands of the Spaniards, and the subsequent subjugation of their descendants in the hands of the Anglo-Americans. Her unconventional language and the spiritualism that permeates her writing[7] may be considered a blemish by die-hard scholars but they are surely a strong bond between her past and present, and a manner to address a multifarious audience. She wants the white man to understand her

[7] '*El choque de un alma atrapado entre el mundo del espíritu y el mundo de la técnica a veces la deja entullada*. Craddled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value system, *la mestiza* undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war.' (ANZALDÚA, 1987: 78)

plea the same way she wishes her own people to be proud of their heritage and to fight discrimination rather than resigning:

> We are the porous rock in the stone metate
> squatting on the ground.
> We are the rolling pin, el maíz y agua,
> la masa harina. Somos el amasijo.
> Somos lo molido en el metate.
> We are the comal sizzling hot,
> the hot tortilla, the hungry mouth.
> We are the coarse rock.
> We are the grinding motion,
> the mixed potion, somos el molcajete.
> We are the pestle, the comino, ajo, pimienta,
> We are the chile colorado,
> the green shoot that cracks the rock.
> We will abide. (ANZALDÚA, 1987: 81)

To Anzaldúa, creative writing is a way to get closer to the essence of things. She writes:

> Often when reading a poem or a story, before it even hits your mind, it's already plucking at your flesh, tugging at your heart. When it does that to you before it hits your mind, it has activated your imagination. You'll feel and experience things, not just visually or kinesthetically, but with your whole body and mind (KEATING, 2009: 107).

Using literary elements when presenting theoretical concepts or denouncing discrimination against people at the margins is perhaps a way for Anzaldúa to make her statement better assimilated without losing its strength. Similarly, Menchú's oral account of the atrocities against Maya people was translated into a narrative that presents many literary elements. The literature in Menchú's testimonio, however, has been much criticized, and Beverly (1996: 275), points out that her testimonio has been described, among other things, as a literary invention by David Stolls and a romanticizing of suffering by Dinesh D'Souza.

For Berverly '*I, Rigoberta Menchú* is the most interesting work of *literature* produced in Latin America in the last fifteen years.' (271). However, as the book has been admitted in some American Universities, the author argues that Menchú's book should remain a provocation in the academy rather than becoming a canonized piece of work, which would make it part of institutional hegemony. Beverly wishes students to feel uncomfortable with Menchú's account rather than virtuous by allowing her book in.

Good literature or not, for Pratt (1992: 39) 'the extraordinary specificity and vividness of the narrative and its elaborate emotive dimension overcome the dehumanizing reflexes that tend to insulate young Americans from the suffering of others, limiting their capacity for empathetic response.' Thus like in Anzalduá's narrative, literature in Menchú's testimonio may be a creative shortcut to awareness.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Due to space constraint, unfortunately, it was not possible to go any deeper into such a meaningful subject such as the ongoing struggle for the end of discrimination against the descendants of the rightful ancient dwellers of the 'New World', neither was it possible to discuss class and gender, which are also part of the authors' struggle against discrimination, especially by Anzaldúa. For what has been discussed herein, it is noted that both Menchú and Anzaldúa seem to fight on behalf of their ancestors and their descendants against a common enemy: the colonizers, understood as both the Spaniards and their descendants and those from Anglo lineage. Word is the strategic common element used by the authors in their quest, and aimed both at the oppressor and oppressed.

Focusing on the struggle with words only (Menchú does mention in her testimonio their readiness to use real weapons to defend themselves) I see both Menchú and Anzaldúa' strategies as examples of *transculturation,* where they both use material from the dominant culture to reproduce a hybrid discourse that can touch both sides. Menchú learns Spanish as a communication tool and is notably unrepentant for using elements from the Bible, alongside indigenous beliefs, to legitimate struggle. For her, the text of the catholic sacred book is a way to educate villagers, to show them that they can fight for their beliefs. She mentions the example of Judith, who fought for her people against their king and who won the battle. Anzaldúa uses English and the academy as means of communication within Anglo culture, and Spanish and the Indian culture to reach her own people. By doing so she places them side-by-side as if calling these disjointed audiences for a dialogue within Pratt's 'contact zone'. It cannot be forgotten, however, that the hibridity of both women's narratives does cause the chaos Pratt warns us about. The discussion over the openness of literature invading the theoretical space, the (un)desirable canonization of testimonio narratives, unconventional writing, the oppressed resignation – these all feed the chaos, from which a *Creole* language may rise one day to, maybe, make the dialogue more fluid.

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