



ENTREMUNDOS

## On Rigoberta Menchú & Malcolm X

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There is the story of a seminary student who cut out, with a pair of scissors, every verse about serving the poor in his Bible. The finished product was, unsurprisingly, barely readable. Scripture without the poor was literally on the verge of collapse.

Unfortunately, both the United States and Guatemala are at risk of cutting out portions of their own histories. Two major figures help illustrate this problem: the civil rights activist and black power icon Malcolm X, and the Pan-Maya leader and Presidential candidate Rigoberta Menchú.

The parallels between Menchú and Malcolm are striking. Both galvanized international support for their causes, largely because of their personal stories. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *I, Rigoberta Menchú* became instant classics, and their horrifying descriptions of violence coupled with their simple, yet profound, analysis of the world around them have impacted millions of readers.

Yet the legacy of each has been complicated by claims of exaggeration (or falsification) by historians. Dr. Manning Marable, in his book *Malcolm X: a Life of Reinvention*, argues that Malcolm's criminal youth as portrayed in his autobiography was more "allegory" than truth, used to illustrate the transformative power of Islam.

This should sound familiar to readers of David Stoll's, *Rigoberta Menchú*. Only seven years after she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Stoll challenged Menchú's claims of lacking a formal education and watching her brother burn alive, arguing that statements like these were fabricated to illustrate the necessity of Guatemala's guerilla movement.

Neither historian disputed the broader claims that both Malcolm and Menchú were making, principally about the systemic and structural racism alive in both the United States and Guatemala. Both figures can even be forgiven for committing crimes almost everyone is guilty of. But when this type of historical revisionism is true on a broader scale, creating an honest, open, and stable society becomes infinitely more difficult.

In the United States, slashed education budgets have swelled classroom sizes to forty in many public schools, making it harder for teachers and students to wrestle with the past – particularly as curriculum focuses more and more on science and vocation and less on the humanities. 83% of eighth-graders who took a 2010 national history exam had a less-than-proficient grasp of U.S. History. One state even eliminated history its government didn't like: Arizona recently banned ethnic studies, and one school district cancelled its Mexican-American studies program.

In Guatemala, schools that openly engage *la Violencia* on more than a superficial level are few and far between. Some *Quetzaltecos* I've talked with are surprised that I teach Guatemalan history at all, and shocked that I'm "allowed" to use texts like Juan Gerardi's *Guatemala, Nunca Más* in my classroom, since it's so often omitted from public and private curriculums.

The inequality Menchú and Malcolm saw in their respective nations – for blacks, the indigenous, women, the poor – did not disappear with the Peace Accords or a black president. If students are not exposed to the past in all its complexity, progress beyond paper signatures and minority politicians will prove impossible.

Malcolm X and Rigoberta Menchú spoke (and speak) important truths about two interconnected nations. But in addition to those truths is a cautionary tale: truth and progress can be smothered by manipulation and omission.

Few pursuits are more sacred than the pursuit of truth, but truth is rarely useful unless it is whole and nothing but. The millions of students in Guatemala and the United States who graduate this year are being asked to write the next scene in a story they may not know – or a story they've only heard fragments of. The question then is what kinds of stories will their nations continue to tell? Or more importantly, what stories will they be willing and able to listen to?