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Paper Title: Rigoberta Menchu
Text: An Indian Woman
In Guatemala: Without A Trace Of Bitterness In Her Voice
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Transcultural perspectives
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Guatemala is the land of Eternal Springs and the home of the richly cultured and historic Mayan people. It is also the country of Rigoberta Menchu, an illiterate farm worker, turned voice of oppressed people everywhere. Guatemala also has the sad distinction of being home to Latin America's oldest civil war." For more than three decades, left-wing guerrillas have fought a series of rightist governments in Guatemala. The war has killed an estimated 140,000 in the country, which has 11 million people." (N.

Y. Times June 14, 1996 pA4 col 2)
This is a story of a people in crisis, and one woman's struggle to use truth as a means of setting her people free. The majority of the population are Indians, and much of the struggles arise out of the ashes of the past. Spain conquered Guatemala in 1524, which was the start of the oppression of the native people of Guatemala. Since this time the native people have been ruled by the Spanish speaking minority, the Ladinos, many of which are descended from the Spanish colonists.

Beginning in 1954, when Guatemala's elected government was overthrown by the army, the military began a brutal war against the Indian people. This type of torture and oppression continued, and during the 1970's the repression was especially harsh; during this time more and more Indians began to resist. It was during this time that Rigoberta Menchu's family became involved in the resistance. The situation in Guatemala is similar to South Africa, where the black majority are ruled with absolute power by the

white minority. Like South Africa, the Indians in Guatemala are lacking in even the most basic of human rights.

“ Indeed the so-called forest Indians are being systematically exterminated in the name of progress. But unlike the Indian rebels of the past, who wanted to go back to pre-Columbian times, Rigoberta Menchu is not fighting in the name of an idealized or mythical past.” (Menchu xiii) Rigoberta is working toward drawing attention to the plight of native people around the globe. Once an illiterate farm worker, she has taught herself to read and write Spanish, the language of her oppressor, as a means of relating her story to the world. She tells the story of her life with honesty and integrity in hopes of impressing upon the world the indignation of the oppressed.

In addition to the Spanish language, Rigoberta borrows such things as the bible and trade union organization in order to use them against their original owners. There is nothing like the bible in her culture. She says, “ The Bible is written, and that gives us one more weapon.” (Menchu xviii) Her people need to base their actions on the laws that come down from the past, on prophecy. Her own history and the history of her family is told with great detail in the book I, Rigoberta Menchu. Not only does one learn about the culture of her people and about the community in which she lives, but an understanding is gained as to impetus to react against one's oppressor. Born the sixth child to an already impoverished but well respected family, Rigoberta remembers growing up in the mountains on land that no one else wanted, spending months at a time going with her family to work on the fincas (plantations).

A lorry owned by the finca would come to their village, and the workers, alongwith their children and animals, would ride together, in filthy andovercrowdedconditions. Each lorry would hold approximately forty people, and the trip tothe finca took two nights and one day, with no stops allowed for thebathroom, it is easy to imagine the unsanitary condition that resulted. Each workerwouldtake with them a cup and a plate and a bottle for water when they worked inthefields. The youngest of the children that were not yet able to work had noneedfor their own cup and plate since, if they did not work, they would not befedby the finca. These children's mothers would share with them their own rationof tortilla and beans, though many of the children were severelymalnourished, and two of Rigoberta's own brothers died while on the finca. At the tender age of eight Rigoberta was earning money to help her family, andas proof of her own personal fortitude, by age ten she was picking the quotasofan adult and was paid as such.

Her first experience in the city was at twelveyears old in the capital of Guatemala where she worked as a maid. She