Articulating a Post-Marxist Politics of Autobiography: Reclaiming Coherence, Referentiality, and Representation in a Poststructural World

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Abstract

There is empirical evidence for the progressive political possibilities of autobiography in the observed social influence of texts such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, a work that significantly affected Euro-American attitudes and policies toward South-Central America. However, a theoretical account of an effective politics of autobiography requires more than empirical observation; rather, it rests heavily on three conjectures: first, that autobiography is a coherent category distinct from other genres; second, that authorial referentiality, the claim that the author, narrator, and protagonist of an autobiography are the same person, is legitimate; and third, that autobiography can represent asymmetric, meaningful difference between autobiographic subjects. In recent years, these foundational characteristics of autobiography have been undermined by the radical poststructuralist argument that meaning is entirely unstable, a position that results in the elision of autobiography with other genres, the annihilation of the author/narrator/protagonist equation, and the collapse of meaningful differences between autobiographic subjects. Drawing on Stuart Hall's post-Marxist concept of articulation, which stabilizes meaning through arbitrary closures tied to contingent socio-historic circumstances, this paper proposes a theoretical framework for autobiographical politics that respects legitimate poststructural concerns without weakening autobiographic coherence, authorial referentiality, and meaningful difference. Post-Marxist articulation is shown to provide a robust justification for each of the three foundational conjectures, once socio-historic particularities are properly accounted for; however, the theoretical and practical limitations of articulation are also considered in each case. Future possibilities for the politics of autobiography are briefly discussed at the end of the paper.

Keywords: autobiographic referentiality, autobiography theory, politics of autobiography, post-Marxist articulation, radical poststructuralism, Stuart Hall

If politics is knowledge and manipulation of the different interests operating within a particular social sphere ("Politics," 2005), then a politics of autobiography is one that seeks both to understand and to exploit the production, distribution, and consumption of self-life-writing. Consider *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, a first-person account of government atrocities perpetrated against Menchú's family and indigenous Guatemalan peasant community (Menchú & Burgos-Debray, 1984), which provoked major changes in Euro-American policy toward South-Central America, and contributed to Menchú's receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize (Ashcroft, 2001). Menchú's story offers empirical evidence for autobiography's progressive political possibilities: it illustrates that autobiography, traditionally the voice of "great men" (Long, 1999), can represent the voice of marginalized interests, creating what Swindells calls a "text of the oppressed" (as cited in Anderson, 2001, p. 103). However, radical poststructural reconceptualizations of autobiography undermine theoretical support for its political functions by emptying the category of any coherent meaning and by disconnecting the autobiographer from the autobiographic "I" (Anderson, 201; Brosman, 2005). Under such theoretical regimes, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* would be judged indistinguishable from fiction and its author would not be considered its protagonist; thus it would be disempowered as a political instrument through the uncoupling of text, author, and historical circumstance. In response to this theoretical assault on the political integrity of autobiography, I advocate an alternative theoretical framework that strengthens the three aspects of autobiography I judge most vulnerable to attacks from poststructural extremism: categorical coherence, authorial referentiality, and the meaningful representation of difference.

The reclamation of these three characteristics requires a robust and resilient theoretical account that retains a progressive edge while acknowledging well-founded poststructural concerns. Reactionary positions that reject poststructuralism *tout court* (e.g., Brosman, 2005) fail to account for legitimate problems with structural and humanist approaches. For example, in the face of traditional theories of autobiography, de Man (1979) contends that "just as we seem to assert that all texts are autobiographical, we should say that, by the same token, none of them is or can be" (p. 922), thus raising issues of blurred genres and autobiographic veracity. These issues are highlighted in the controversy around *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, which appears to have been partly fictionalized by its author in an attempt to heighten its political effectiveness (Ashcroft, 2001). Is *I, Rigoberta Menchú* autobiography or fiction? Conversely, is a novel that represents a veiled account of its author's life, such as Hesse's *Steppenwolf* (Mathers, 2001), fiction or autobiography? In either case, are they works of truth or deception? Such questions are not dealt with by a retreat to a world untouched by poststructuralist concerns. The case is

quite the reverse: a robust theory of autobiography needs to embrace the contradictions and difficulties of a world of blurred genres, dilemmatic truth, and shifting, unstable meanings (Kadar & Perreault, 2005), while avoiding the terminal postmodern position that we are at the end of signification, and thus, of history (Grossberg & Hall, 1996).

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall presents a colourful metaphor of this postmodern condition: "If the Titanic is going down…[,] how long is it going to take?" (Grossberg & Hall, 1996, p. 134). That is, the recognition that the postmodern rupture is the end of meaning as it was once conceived should not trap us in unending paralysis; rather, this rupture represents a pivotal moment, beyond which new possibilities exist for political theory and practice. Yes, structuralism has been sunk by the work of Derrida and others (Gottdiener, 1994): meaning can no longer be fixed, and Hall (1985) agrees that we must accept no necessary correspondence can exist between signifying practices. However, he also argues for a careful scrutiny of the extreme poststructural conclusion that if meaning is not fixed, then it must be utterly unstable. Hall asks what constitutes "no necessary correspondence," and concludes that it is *not* "necessarily no correspondence," the condition that leads to the no-exit poststructural wasteland of "perpetual slippage of meaning" (p. 92). Rather, Hall suggests that "no necessary correspondence" simply means "contingent correspondence" (p. 94). In other words, the acknowledged instability of meaning does not lead to the "end" of meaning, but only to meaning that is contingently stable, that is, bound by particular social, historical, and material circumstances. Hall refers to contingent correspondence as articulation, a particularly apt, bi-sensed term: every idea and its associated signifying practice are articulated (expressed) in unique socio-historical circumstances, and these signifying practices may come to be contingently articulated (linked together) without the imposition of a deterministic causality (Fiske, 1996; Grossberg & Hall, 1996).

Consider, for example, that English professors articulate (express) conceptions of autobiography to their students and peers, and these articulations are uniquely "accented" by time and place (Fiske, 1996). Taken together, they are further articulated (linked together) as a reproductive system of ideas and signifying practices: students may express to others conceptions of autobiography that are similar to those articulated by their professors; those others may, in their turn, further circulate similar ideas; and so on. This gives us a sketch of the post-Marxist concept of an ideology (Hall, 1985), which is not a fixed and totalizing entity, as classical Marxism suggests, but a contingent and evolving reproductive social process that sets elastic constraints or tendencies on what can be thought, and thus signified, across a wide social domain (Hall, 1985; Williams, 1991). Significantly, a constraint or tendency is not a deterministic cause: English students may be likely to reproduce their teachers' conceptions of autobiography, but, as Hall (1996) puts it, there is "no guarantee" that this will occur (p. 44).

Nonetheless, ideology under articulation remains political: collectives that articulate (express and are linked with) specific political positions are not thereby guaranteed results, but

such results are more likely if political positions are collectively articulated than if no collective articulations occur (Hall, 1985). Post-Marxist ideologies are elastic processes with political potential to the extent that they encompass the contestation of competing ideas and practices, which Butler (1997) aptly describes as "a mode of sustaining conflict in politically productive ways" (p. 269); that is, contestation stabilizes ideologies by placing elasticity and constraint in tension—Gramsci identifies this restless process as hegemony (Turner, 2003). Where constraints keep contestation to a minimum, hegemony creates transient and contingent "structures-in-dominance" (Hall, 1985, p. 100); where constraints slacken and contestation increases, structures-in-dominance may be dispersed, and hegemony may cease to favour a narrow set of interests (Grossberg, 1997).

The hegemonic contestation of ideologies is also implicated in the social construction of the subject: I am what I can think, and what I can think is constrained—although not absolutely determined—by the ideologies under which I operate. Accordingly, ideologies are socially articulated with subjectivity (Grossberg, 1997), and so it can be said that the subject is socially constructed through signifying practices, or with somewhat less generality, through language (Barker & Galasinski, 2001). Agency is not precluded, as no two articulations are ever identical, being contingent on complex material circumstances (Grossberg); moreover, the articulation of the subject involves many overlapping ideologies, and so subjects are overdetermined (Grossberg), which increases their agentic unpredictability.

Given the foregoing, I argue that post-Marxist articulation provides a resilient theoretical framework that allows for the instability of meaning while retaining, as contingent entities, the tools needed to implement an effective politics: hegemony, contestation, ideologies, structures-in-dominance, overdetermination, and limited agentic subjectivity. Accordingly, I now deploy this contingent, materially constrained framework of articulation in the reclamation of the political functions of autobiography.

The first element of autobiography theory to which I apply this framework is categorical coherence: autobiography must mean something that is distinguishable from fiction and other literary genres; otherwise, works such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* become unmoored from their concrete socio-historical context—they cannot articulate a politically implicated reality. Yet de Man's (1979) statement "that the distinction between fiction and autobiography is not an either/or polarity but… is undecidable" (p. 921) seems difficult to dispute, given that *I, Rigoberta Menchú* may be semi-fictive autobiography and *Steppenwolf* may be semi-autobiographical fiction. One method that attempts to stabilize autobiography as a distinctive category is the use of denotative definition. Lejeune states that an autobiography is "a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his [sic] own existence," where there must be "identity between the author, the narrator, and the protagonist" (as cited in Anderson, 2001, p. 2), but this definition is inadequate: "retrospective prose narrative" eliminates diaries, letters, poetry, and other non-traditional forms; "real person" implies an

otherwise unsupported naïve realism; "concerning his own existence" does not settle questions of veracity; and so on.

Definitions fail because autobiography is an overdetermined category that is a site of contestation for disparate and often competing interests; as Anderson (2001) observes, some critics regard the definition of autobiography as impossible, while others regard it as essential—poststructuralism and feminism only add further complications. And yet, in spite of inadequate definitions, Eakin (1992) notes that readers of autobiography can usually distinguish it from other forms and that they regard autobiographers as the subjects of their own works—what Eakin calls the "felt difference" of autobiography (p. 29). Mandel reinforces this "feel" for autobiography, stating that "every reader knows that autobiographies and novels are finally totally distinct" (as cited in Anderson, 2001, p. 6). Thus, we are faced with a conflict between reader experience and the conclusions of radical poststructural theory. Post-Marxist articulation provides a non-reductionist way out: it allows coherent meaning to be made of overdetermined categories because it allows for foreclosure—the imposition of arbitrary closure on categorical meaning (Barker & Galasinski, 2001).

Suppose I am holding an unopened book from my library's "Autobiography" shelf, and utter, "This book is an autobiography." As a typical reader, I may well be foreclosing "autobiography" to have the meaning given to it by Lejeune, so that if I open the book and find to my surprise that it reads like a novel, I might utter, "This book is wrongly shelved." This new articulation does not invalidate my prior articulation; it is a unique utterance under unique conditions, and constitutes a new contingent linkage with the ideology of autobiography. However, if a librarian tells me, "No, this is a genuine autobiography, even though it is narrated in the third person," and if my constraining ideologies include librarians as authorities, then I may articulate a change of mind.

In each of these articulations, autobiography remains coherent and distinct, because arbitrary closure severs competing interpretations. If I "change my mind," autobiography as a distinct category is not imperilled; I have merely articulated a more elastic ideology. Similarly for *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and *Steppenwolf* in my particular socio-historical context, the former is an autobiography in which I hear Menchú's voice as narrator, while the latter is a novel in which I hear a narrating voice that is not Hesse's—that is how they "feel" to me, and so, that is how they *are* for me. Knowing that some aspects of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* might be fictional does not disturb my sense that Menchú is author, narrator, and protagonist, any more than my knowledge that some aspects of *Steppenwolf* might be autobiographic disturbs my sense that Hesse, the author, is neither narrator nor protagonist. Others, in different contexts, may contest those conclusions, but that does not mean that I or others have confused fiction and autobiography; we have simply articulated different aspects of the ideology of autobiography.

In these examples, post-Marxist articulation accounts for the "felt difference" of autobiography in the absence of precise definitions, without annihilating the coherence or

distinctiveness of autobiography. However, while I can provide examples of autobiographic articulation that indicate how it functions in practice, I can provide neither a fixed definition of autobiography nor an axiomatic account of it. Axiomatic systems are absolutely closed, but articulations are only transiently and arbitrarily closed. Accordingly, under articulation, the coherence and distinctiveness of autobiography require the acceptance that the social world is contingent, and that meaning is tied to specific socio-historical conditions. I believe that the failure to accept the role of social particularity accounts for the supposed annihilation of autobiography asserted by critics such as de Man, and I use as an example an abbreviated argument from his paper "Autobiography as De-facement."

De Man's primary attack is found in his deconstruction of autobiography and fiction. De Man (1979) concludes—correctly, in my opinion—that autobiography "demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and of totalization (that is the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems made up of tropological substitutions" (p. 922). However, while this argument may be valid as far as it goes, it is not complete: it correctly rejects the possibility of absolute closure, and hence correctly rejects the possibility of any necessary "coming into being" of autobiography, but it ignores the possibility of arbitrary closure, which does not preclude the possibility of a contingent "coming into being." Viewed as articulations, autobiography and fiction come into being as distinct forms precisely *because* their instantiation occurs under specific social closures. De Man refers to "a hypothetically pure fiction" (p. 921), but textual production and consumption are not hypothetical practices: they are located in social particularities.

Autobiography, and its coherence and distinctiveness, cannot be divorced from the ways in which the category is used in practice—in Fish's terms, from the interpretive communities in which it is deployed (Van Leeuwen, 2005). There is a circularity here, but not a vicious one: the ideology of autobiography is what interpretive communities "say it is," but what interpretive communities "say it is" is constrained by that same ideology, as post-Marxist articulation allows. There is no one stable configuration, no necessary universal structure, yet competing meanings do not annihilate one another or fly apart without limit. De Man's apparently deadly arguments concerning autobiography are, under articulation, only an indication of complex hegemonic contestation. I believe that, under articulation, the meaning of autobiography is not driven solely by authorial intention, by considerations of isolated texts, or by reader response within interpretive communities: all of these are at work all of the time within a complex but concrete social matrix. It is the recognition that autobiography is a hegemonically contested articulation grounded in material social conditions that allows its categorical coherence to be defended successfully against the arguments of a radical, idealist poststructuralism.

However, granting that autobiography is a coherent, if highly contested, category under a post-Marxist framework of articulation, what of the author of an autobiographical work? Is the author, in Lejeunean terms, a "real person" who coincides with the narrator and protagonist?

As is the case with categorical coherence, a theory of articulation cannot yield a universal denotative definition of what it means to be the author of an autobiography, but it can provide that meaning within a particular socio-historical circumstance. If the political force of autobiography is to be preserved, this meaning must include a referential relationship between author and authored work: as Stanley (2000) declares from a feminist perspective, a theory that "denies or despises the necessarily referential basis of autobiography as *life*-writing as well as *self*-writing is in analytical as well as political trouble" (p. 44). Here, I argue that articulation can account for the "necessarily referential basis of autobiography," even for an exemplary "anti-autobiography" such as *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, in which the denial of autobiographic referentiality is a primary objective of the work (Eakin, 1992, p. 3).

In *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977b), the author is the sociologist and semiotician Roland Barthes, the narrator is to be considered as if "a character in a novel" (p. 1), and the protagonists are variously "I," "he," and "R.B." (e.g., p. 55). This is a deliberate attempt to split apart the Lejeunean author/narrator/protagonist equation, thus obliterating authorial referentiality. I believe that Barthes's deliberately transgressive anti-referential positioning is connected with his deep understanding of semiotics. Following Saussure, Barthes, in his *Elements of Semiology* (1977a), describes the sign as consisting of a physical representation, or signifier, and a mental conception, or signified. A signifier for "cat" might be the letters C-A-T, and its signified, my mental conception of a furry four-legged feline. Nowhere in this scheme is there any reference to a "real cat," because the meaning of "cat" derives from its relationships with other signs, such as "dog," "fur," "pet," etc., and not from a "real" referent or object (1977a).

Thus, according to Barthes (1977b), when an author writes an autobiographic statement, it immediately slips away because "the fact… is abolished in the signifier" (p. 56). That is, the written words can refer to each other, but not to the author, for the author is not the words—"the symbolic becomes literally *immediate*" (p. 56). For example, if I write, "I am opening a newspaper," who or what is the "I" of the sentence? It is not the "real me," as I am neither the signifier, a black vertical bar printed on the page, nor the signified, the concept of someone opening a newspaper. The signifier "I," the very staple of autobiography, is viewed within Barthesian semiotics as a "shifter," that is, as a type of signifier (like "this," "here," or "then") that gains its meaning only from the surrounding text (Barthes, 1977a, pp. 22-23; 1977b, pp. 165-166); the shifter "I" has no signified that is separable from the immediate text (Lechte, 1994). Therefore, the shifting signifier "I" within an autobiography cannot possibly be a Lejeunean "real person," and specifically, it cannot be the author.

This situation "feels" wrong: when I read *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, it is Barthes's voice I hear as narrator, and Barthes whom I regard as the protagonist, in spite of Barthes's assiduous efforts to prevent this very experience from occurring. Post-Marxist articulation explains this conflict between Barthes's theory and my experience: Barthes's argument relies

on a formal, idealist semiotics that ignores the contingent operation of ideology. Barthes is technically correct that "I," "he," and "R.B." are shifting signifiers that erase both autobiographers and autobiography in generality; however, I argue that the articulation of *Roland Barthes* in a particular material social circumstance—such as when I read it—causes these shifters to lose their strict localization, and to become contingently implicated in an immense ideological network. Social contingency moves us away from Barthes's idealism and toward the materiality of autobiographic texts and their authors/producers and readers/consumers, that is, toward the articulated ideologies and social subjects of post-Marxism. Accordingly, the "R.B." of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977b) is not his "own symbol… freewheeling in language" (p. 56); on the contrary, the text of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* is an articulation of the social subject "Roland Barthes," embedded in a complex and constraining mesh of material social conditions.

This socially constructed subject "Roland Barthes" is grounded in specific signifying practices that include, for me, works authored by Barthes that I have read, information concerning Barthes that I have derived from secondary sources, discussions with others concerning Barthes, and so on. Understood in this way, the social subject "Roland Barthes" is not (limited to) the now-deceased embodied being named Roland Barthes, but is a social construct that continues to circulate as a reproductive set of signifying practices. Therefore, I argue that articulation allows that the correspondence between the social subject and the material body is just one of many relationships that are involved in subjectivity, and one that is not essential to the subject's social constitution, as I and many others are often completely unaware of—even uninterested in—the subject's bodily constitution. Although I have never met Rigoberta Menchú or Roland Barthes, I have no hesitation in articulating that they are (or were) "real people" and that they are the subjects of their own works. Extreme poststructuralism is correct that if I lived in a hypothetical world in which arbitrary closure were forbidden or impossible, I might have radically different beliefs about Menchú or Barthes, but, as it happens, I live in *this* socio-historical culturally specific circumstance, in which my ideological constructions include the hegemonic understanding that autobiographies—even "anti-biographies" such as *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* —have real authors, who quite frequently write with the intent to be truthful about their lives. This is not a "common-sense" proposition, but an ideological one, based on a reasonable foreclosure of meaning within my current socio-historic context.

On this argument, autobiography is contingently referential: the author, narrator, and protagonist are the same "real person," or rather, because the phenomenological self is inaccessible except through social signifying practices, they are the same socially constructed subject. Barthes perhaps unwittingly refers to his own authorial referentiality in the opening line of *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977b), when he writes that "it must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel," because the qualifier "as if" signals us that Barthes, the author of the book, is indeed its narrator—and protagonist—but wishes us to

pretend otherwise. Indeed, if I had "felt" the narrator and protagonist to be unrelated to the author, then I would not have recognized the work as an autobiography. As with autobiographical coherence, there is a non-vicious circularity here: the authorial referentiality of autobiography is genuine because interpretive communities "say it is," but interpretive communities "say it is" because they are to a degree constrained by the ideology of autobiography. Authorial referentiality may be contested, but that does not annihilate it. Indeed, it is the contestation of referentiality in the here-and-now of specific social circumstance that protects it from the dissolution advocated by radical, idealist poststructuralism.

After accounting for referentiality and coherence, the ability to represent difference among autobiographic subjects must also be affirmed in order for autobiography to serve political objectives. If autobiography cannot articulate the differences among the subjects to which it refers, then the potential diversity of autobiography collapses into the uniformity of masculinism (Long, 1999). But not just any form of difference will do: autobiography must be capable of expressing asymmetric or irreducible difference. Luce Irigaray (1991), through her explorations of sexual difference, clarifies the importance of irreducible difference, or the "other of the other" (p. 70), when contrasted with symmetric binary difference, or the "other of the same" (p. 111); this she regards as the linchpin of patriarchal domination (Whitford, 1991).

As a paradigmatic case, Irigaray (1995) argues that "man and woman" are irreducibly different, a distinction not captured in the patriarchal opposition between an active, rational, unified masculinity and a passive, irrational, fragmented femininity. The effects of this patriarchal symmetric binary opposition—masculine/feminine—run deep: the masculine occupies the symbolic realm of language through which subjectivity is constructed, and so it is men who fashion themselves as "subjects" (Irigaray 1985, 1989), while women are deemed their opposite—they are "objects" (1985). In post-Marxist terms, the articulation of the traditional masculine/feminine binary constrains thought and signification in favour of patriarchal interests (e.g., Freiwald, 2005).

The same logic can be applied to other binaries—for example, "White/Black" (Irigaray, 2003)—and the intersection of these binaries supports the patriarchal ideology that reserves normative subjectivity for Euro-American white males (e.g., Razack, 2005). Irreducible difference challenges this norm by asserting that binary oppositions are a patriarchal construction (Irigaray, 1989; Moi, 1988), and that the truly other is not the binary opposite but the incommensurably different (Whitford, 1991). Irreducible difference undercuts the singular nature of patriarchal subjectivity, allowing for many different potential subjectivities (Irigaray, 2003).

However, Irigarayan irreducible sexual difference, which I have presented as "the foundation of alterity" (Irigaray, 2003, p. 127), has been labelled by some as essentialist, that is, as grounded in the biological body (Whitford, 1991). Irigaray (2003) claims that this is not so,

and Braidotti (2003), explicitly in Irigaray's defence, provides a nuanced description intended to dispel essentialist concerns: "The body is then an interface, a threshold, a field of intersecting material and symbolic forces, it is a surface where multiple codes (race, sex, class, age, etc.) are inscribed" (p. 44). Braidotti's argument that the biological body is not the primary determinant of subjectivity meshes well with the post-Marxist concept of the subject as overdetermined and articulated differently under different material conditions—the subject is not a product of essentialism but of social construction. Accordingly, a post-Marxism of articulation does not foreclose irreducible difference: different subjects may be constructed in part through non-overlapping ideologies, which would leave such subjects irreducible to one another.

Politically, if contingent irreducible difference is accepted, then a just society is not one in which all subjects are treated equally, for that ignores irreducible difference (Martin, 2003), but one in which all subjectivities are accorded equal recognition: this means that each subject has the opportunity to express his or her subjectivity through signification—through a voice (Irigaray, 1993). Subjects speak (of) themselves, and what is expressed in each case is a contingent articulation, changing from one circumstance to the next, while remaining constrained by ideological boundaries.

But what is speaking (of) oneself, if not autobiography? Articulating autobiography with irreducible difference and referentiality makes autobiography a primary site of identity formation: it becomes a space from which referential subjects can speak new—or newly acknowledged—subjectivities (e.g., Gooze, 1992; Killick, 1998; Suzack, 2005). However, Irigaray (2002) makes clear that an appreciation of irreducible difference requires us to "acquire the capacity to remain silent in order to listen to the other as other, and to his or her truth which will always remain strange for us, unknowable by us" (p. 85). Thus, a progressive politics of autobiography includes the difficult task of respecting articulations from which we may be excluded—of accepting with good grace that not everything is open to us or intended for us. The political role of the autobiographer is not necessarily to promote universal understanding, but to speak an articulated subjectivity into existence within a specific social context. Irreducibly different subjects may thus produce irreducibly different autobiographies.

This is particularly true in transcultural circumstances, as exemplified by postcolonial texts such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Indeed, postcolonialism has brought with it a keener understanding that Euro-American culture has a history of ignoring irreducible difference, and of inflating its grasp of the inner workings of other cultures (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001). An appreciation of the contingent nature of post-Marxist articulation can be a constant reminder that the arbitrary closures of our own culture are just that: arbitrary. In other cultures and under different circumstances, other closures, equally arbitrary but very different in kind, may be made, and, as Irigaray (2002) contends, such differences need to be met with respect and with an acknowledgment that our own articulations may sometimes make those of other cultures unintelligible—and vice versa.

Irreducible difference, like autobiographical coherence and authorial referentiality, is grounded in the socially particular hegemonic contestation that is inextricably linked to the post-Marxist framework of articulation outlined in this paper. The contingent nature of articulation ensures that contestation never ends, and indeed, the accent of social and historical particularity can be considered as the engine that keeps contestation alive (Barker & Galasinski, 2001). Contestation may mean that there is never a final settlement of any ideological question, but it simultaneously provides that the struggle toward resolution is never without political value (Grossberg, 1997); in this way it moves us past the postmodern rupture and into new possibilities. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is emblematic of these possibilities and of their dependence upon the post-Marxist reclamation of autobiographical coherence, referentiality, and irreducible difference.

That *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is coherently autobiographical is admitted even by such staunch critics as anthropologist David Stoll, who spent a decade looking for politically motivated inaccuracies in Menchú's text; Stoll's research culminated in his exposé *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999), which reveals the likely fictive nature of some events in Menchú's story (e.g., pp. x-xiii). Nonetheless, when asked if the book was an invention of leftist insurgents, such as the Guatemalan Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), Stoll replied:

> No. The narrative is so convincing that it could not have been programmed by anybody, especially by a group as dogmatic as the EGP.… [Menchú] believed in the ideology and used it to frame the experience of her family and people. I've never said that her testimonial is a lie or a fraud. (Fernández García & Stoll, 2001, pp. 66-67)

Yet, despite such charitable opinions from Menchú's detractors, the genesis of the book would seem to belie its status as a coherent autobiography: the substance of the text is based on 26 hours of audiotapes recorded in Menchú's halting Spanish by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray (Taracena & Aceituno, 2001); these recordings were subsequently transcribed and then edited by many different individuals—all without Menchú's involvement, review, or approval (Taracena & Aceituno). The resulting book, unlike the audiotapes, is neatly divided into self-contained chapters and represents a highly polished narrative form that is readily familiar to Euro-American readers (Warren, 2001). However, as Arturo Taracena, one of the book's editors, states, "[T]he book is a narration only by Rigoberta, with her own rhythm, with her own inventions, if there are any, with her own emotions, with her own truths" (Taracena & Aceituno, p. 85).

I, Rigoberta Menchú is thus a constructed, polyglot work, and yet it remains Menchú's story in Menchú's voice (Zimmerman, 1996). It is this articulation of the multivocal with the univocal that moves us beyond the postmodern impasse by demonstrating that a politically efficacious

work, born of many hands and published without its own subject's involvement, can be a coherent autobiography. The work is neither a modernist, masculinist univocal life of a "great man" (or woman) nor an undecidable, faceless poststructural text; rather, it is a historically particular collaborative articulation that maintains the "felt difference" of autobiography. What discomfits its critics is not so much its inability to represent Menchú's life experience, as its power to effect political change inside and outside the academy (Pratt, 2001); the book is politically troublesome to Menchú's opponents because it succeeds as autobiography, not because it fails (Pratt, 2001).

Similarly, the referential bond between Menchú and her autobiography enables political possibilities that are otherwise crippled by radical poststructuralism. As Pratt (2001) writes:

> Rigoberta Menchú is the most famous indigenous leader in the world. She received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 for a decade of international work to end a campaign of military terror in her native Guatemala that cost some two hundred thousand indigenous lives. Her powerful testimonial text… *I, Rigoberta Menchú*… achieved a worldwide reception that undoubtedly saved many Guatemalan lives, including Menchú's own. (p. 29)

Menchú is not a bloodless, attenuated Barthesian figure, a "symbol… freewheeling in language" (Barthes, 1977b, p. 56), but a politically significant social subject who is inseparable from her autobiography: without Menchú, there would be no book, and without the book there would be no Menchú, no Nobel Prize-winning Guatemalan activist. *I, Rigoberta Menchú* is an exemplary articulation of subject and text: when Menchú spoke her words to Burgos-Debray there were innumerable futures before her, most of them bleak, and yet had she on this account failed to articulate her story, the future that unfolded would have been very different. Acting on her political beliefs provided no guarantees, but nonetheless, doing so made a difference: it foreclosed certain possibilities and enabled others. This is hegemonic contestation—the politically productive making of meaning—at work (Butler, 1997).

It is, however, important to recall that the meanings made under articulation depend on unique, historically particular circumstances, a recollection that brings focus both to the key role of situated, irreducible difference and to the frequent failures of Euro-American culture to appreciate such difference (e.g., Appiah, 1991; McEwan, 2001). As Guatemalan indigenous scholar Victor Montejo (2001) writes, "Now the debate has turned into Stoll versus Menchú; American anthropologists versus Ladino anthropologists; left-wing versus right-wing intellectuals, and so on.… I ask myself, Where are the Maya people in all of this?" (McEwan, 2001, p. 376). In accord with this concern, irreducible difference under articulation allows that the meanings made of Menchú and her work within Guatemalan indigenous cultures cannot be inferred—or, indeed, even properly understood—from the meanings made within the

academic and political circles described by Montejo. Rather, in its uniquely accented articulations among many indigenous and non-indigenous cultures, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* transcends the limitations of Euro-American cultural reductionism—including the reductionism inherent in the postmodern impasse, which is itself a provincial and Eurocentric construct (Morley, 1996).

As a work that spans cultures, but which is not reducible to any single cultural articulation, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* demonstrates that the reclamation of autobiographical coherence, authorial referentiality, and irreducible difference enables both the understanding and manipulation of the political possibilities of autobiography. However, being but a single case, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* leaves open much larger questions concerning post-Marxism as a framework for the politics of autobiography. Is it possible to develop a framework that respects the historical and cultural particularity of different instances of autobiographical expression, without falling prey to universalizing, ethnocentric reductionism? And, if such a nonreductive, politicized framework is possible, how might it be deployed in the most ethical and effective manner? For as we are activists as well as observers, I believe that we have a responsibility to think, speak, and write our lives, individually and collectively, seeking through autobiography not only to understand our culture, but to transform it.

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