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**Anne Braden, Fannie Lou Hamer,
and Rigoberta Menchu**

*Using Personal Narrative to Build
Activist Movements*

CATHERINE FOSL

I first encountered Rigoberta Menchu's storytelling in early 1985, when I hosted a small group of community women in my suburban Washington, D.C. home to meet her. I had never heard of Menchu at that time, and knew precious little about the plight of Guatemala's Mayan peasant poor. That changed as a result of the evening Menchu spent with us. She was a reserved young woman dressed in hand-woven, brilliantly colored fabrics, and she spoke softly, hesitantly, and with a translator in a tongue not her own (Spanish). The focus of the evening turned out to be her own life story, and her hesitation diminished as her tale unfolded. The contours of her past were riveting, adding detail and validation to beliefs I already held generally about brutality, injustice, and corruption in Central American dictatorships. What I took most from her account was an empathy that heightened my awareness of Guatemalan injustices and made action more compelling. That experience was widely replicated among young, left-leaning, mostly white urbanites like those gathered in my living room, many of whom went on to participate in the burgeoning movement against U.S. corporate and military intervention in Central America.

I did not know it then, but Menchu's narrative had recently been published as a book.¹ Thousands would soon read her testimonial—or hear it as I had—and her saga would help to spark an international solidarity movement of oppressed indigenous peoples, her role in which won Menchu a Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. The details of her account would also become highly contested, however, when a U.S. anthropologist challenged their factual accuracy, igniting a debate among social scientists, literary scholars, and intellectuals more broadly as to the role of “truth.” More on that later. Still, one might argue that the net result was positive insofar as her widespread telling of her story in both oral and written form brought far greater public attention to the cause on which the story centered and raised the consciousness of thousands, at least, of non-Guatemalans regarding the social and economic conditions in that country.

Later in 1985, I attended an anti-racist workshop in North Carolina, during which I heard another gripping personal narrative told by an older white

woman named Anne Braden. Braden gave an impassioned account of a conversion of almost religious intensity she had undergone as a young adult in the 1940s, from being a white southerner who accepted tacitly racial segregation and the privilege it conferred on her to becoming a lifelong crusader against segregation and white supremacy. She described the process as a painful one, “turning myself inside out and upside down,” insofar as it had compelled her to reject the most basic of beliefs with which she had grown up, as well as to confront the complacency of her own family of origin. Braden spoke in tandem with an African American activist, Sadie Hughley, but most in the audience were young, white, progressive-minded, political women, like myself, who were deeply inspired by an elder of their own skin color who had so thoroughly broken with the lessons of her past. I found myself mesmerized by Anne Braden’s story, and over the coming decade, it would become interwoven with my own as I entered a graduate program in U.S. history and chose her as the subject of my dissertation. Once I began spending sustained time with Anne as I interviewed her and occasionally accompanied her to public speaking engagements, I heard her recount that story of her political transformation many times.

My initial experiences with both Menchu’s and Braden’s personal narratives took place more than twenty years ago, but the power of those encounters and others like them figured significantly in my path into both social justice campaigns and the academy. Women like Menchu and Braden exposed me to what was, for me, a new brand of storytelling—one in which seasoned activists recounted personal experiences that created identification between narrator and listeners in ways that galvanized social action. Not only did narratives such as these propel my involvement in anti-racist and anti-imperialist social movements of the 1980s, but they triggered my thinking more generally about how narratives facilitate or inhibit social change. In 1985—the same year I met Menchu and Braden—I began to collect oral histories of women activists, an interest that would ultimately send me into doctoral study in modern U.S. history and a professional path that would set me to collecting and interpreting such narratives for probably the rest of my life.

Becoming a scholar of the southern freedom movement, I soon learned that although Anne Braden’s “racial conversion narrative” (as literary scholar Fred Hobson has labeled it) was more unusual among white activists of her generation insofar as only a small number of southern whites committed their lives to that movement in the 1950s and sixties, many more women in the civil rights movement used their own “stories” as tools for mass mobilization.² The most famous of them, perhaps, is Fannie Lou Hamer, an African American sharecropper and Mississippi native who first heard the message of freedom at age 44 during a voter registration drive through the delta conducted by youthful workers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Hamer’s subsequent attempt to register earned her only threats and eviction

from her home by the plantation owner. Although such defiance made her day-to-day life considerably harder in pre-voting rights Mississippi, Hamer remained resolutely committed to the promise of civil rights, and over the next months and years she withstood dramatic torrents of repression that included one beating in a Montgomery County jail so brutal that it did permanent damage to her health.

Hamer did, however, take away an important resource from those traumatic moments: her memories of them, which she frequently recounted in speeches and in interviews for the rest of her life. Those vivid retellings of her personal experiences, which she interwove with trenchant political and socioeconomic analyses, became widely known and revered among civil rights activists who saw how successfully she roused masses to action. Hamer’s rhetorical talents culminated, perhaps, with her impassioned testimony to the Credentials Committee of the Democratic Party at its national convention in mid-1964. Those remarks were broadcast briefly on national television, detailing the brutality and degradation that dogged her life in Mississippi—and that of any African American seeking voting rights or other, more basic dignities. The inflammatory potential of Hamer’s testimony being broadcast to millions so alarmed President Lyndon Johnson that he called an impromptu White House press conference and demanded the pre-emption of her comments. Hamer’s voice became legendary in civil rights historiography because of the power of her personal narrative, made more powerful perhaps by her ability to punctuate her speeches with soulful, *a cappella* renderings of freedom songs that deepened the emotional impact for listeners. According to attorney Eleanor Holmes Norton, who met Hamer through SNCC, Hamer’s civil rights oratory was rivaled only by that of the Rev. Martin Luther King Junior.³

Personal Narratives as Political Acts

This chapter reflects on Hamer, Braden, and Menchu’s storytelling experiences in order to explore the personal narrative as a strategy employed by social justice activists seeking to prompt a collective consciousness that can propel sociopolitical action. While many of the projects described throughout this anthology have been collective in nature, no overview of stories told to change the world can be complete without an analysis of the role of the personal narrative in that project. The individual telling of one’s own story has been central to movement-building in most if not all modern social justice crusades around the globe.

The personal narrative is, of course, but one of the varieties of stories that drive social movements, to which speech acts of many sorts are essential in the formation and enactment of a collective identity and mass demands for change. Scholars such as Francesca Polletta, for example, have offered compelling interpretations of the stories activists tell themselves within movements to “sustain and strengthen members’ commitment,” but the personal narrative is

a particular variation of that larger set of movement stories.⁴ While an analytical dividing line can be drawn between individual and collective narratives in movements, the personal narrative has a foot in both camps in some important ways. By nature an individual's story, and one that positions its teller as a mediator, the personal narrative recounted in service of social justice also has a dimension of "witnessing" or "author-izing" an experience previously marginalized (as, for example, in the case of "coming-out" stories). Telling one's own story thus has a collective purpose and can work as a consciousness-raising, even a community-organizing tactic.

As Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith have observed, the very framework of recent social movements such as civil, women's, workers', gay, and human "rights" are motivated by personal stories or cases that call injustices into focus.⁵ In that sense, someone may "witness" or "testify" in service of social justice claims in a range of extra-legal settings. In the case of women's testimonies, one might argue (and Sidonie Smith has, in other writings) that a woman who tells her own story necessarily crafts a self differently and more disruptively, challenging prevailing ideologies of gender whether she intends to or not, because of the history of patriarchy that has muted or silenced women's voices.⁶ Even though women activists may occupy a vast range of social conditions depending on their race, class, sexual identity, nationality, etc., it is clear from the most cursory glance at modern social movements that personal narratives made political have been of strategic importance for women activists fashioning collective identities, both in feminist crusades and in other kinds of reform campaigns.

In literature and in life, members of marginalized groups have historically looked often to their personal experiences as the basis for larger social claims. African American literature, for example, was born of slave narratives, which were in the nineteenth century one of the few avenues ex-slaves had for publicizing their critiques of slavery, which they developed by revealing the brutality of their own experiences enslaved. Women's autobiographies and autobiographical fiction then became the building blocks of feminist theory in the late 1960s because they were the most coherent body of literature that foregrounded gender critically in a canon that had all but locked women out. These examples pertain to personal narratives that were written and published, and that literature has indeed flowered in the modern world, especially in the years since World War II. Literary theorist Leigh Gilmore reports, for example, that the number of books published in English and labeled "autobiography" or "memoir" tripled between the 1940s and the 1990s, and similar booms in that genre have punctuated other cultures around the world.⁷ In fact, this literary outpouring has been so vast and so diverse that calling it "autobiography" has given way in some circles to the more expansive category of "life writing" that recognizes variations such as letters, diaries, oral histories, and even autobiographical fiction.⁸

Although many of these published life writings are also consciousness-raising or movement-building projects, another medium of personal stories for social change lies in oral autobiographical narratives issued in the form of individual speeches or testimonials before groups of people who are changed or inspired in at least some small way as a result of the hearing. I prefer not to draw a sharp distinction between the oral and written forms, and in fact two of the three women discussed in these pages (Menchu and Braden) followed their spoken narratives up with published accounts that cover much of the same ground and share many common purposes.⁹ Much of the exploration here is applicable to both oral and written narratives. Yet written texts sometimes raise different considerations having to do with marketing and commodification, as the controversies surrounding the "truth" of biographical details in Menchu's book so amply demonstrate. That particular dispute has played itself out in many venues, and I do not wish to rehash it here in discussing Menchu's story.¹⁰ Because I am ultimately more concerned with historical, rhetorical, and feminist interpretations than with literary ones, my emphasis remains primarily on my subjects' spoken words and on the dialectic between narrator and listener, between individual and collective identity, between self and other.

Embodiment—among the most widely explored elements in feminist scholarship today—creates a different sort of intimacy between narrator and listener than that experienced by a reader. While the impact, the feeling of connection even, may be no more powerful for one who listens than one who reads, the bond created with a written text and its author is at least more solitary and self-contained. Physical presence produces a kind of immediacy and reciprocity that is dialogic or at least creates an opportunity for dialogue. The reciprocity available to a speaker from her audience is either absent or at least delayed in the case of a writer, who has no opportunity to experience her reader's response in the moment it occurs, only later (as in fan mail, for example). If in fact one accepts the most basic of postmodern precepts on the interactive nature of a text, the dialectic between teller and listener would almost necessarily alter at least a bit the story that results.

Most interpreters would concede that the immediacy of person-to-person contact is a part of what galvanizes social action. Although my first exposure to Rigoberta Menchu contained at the time no element of "research," I can still remember the vividness of seeing her and hearing her tell her story. In the case of Hamer, younger activists who recalled later her effect on their lives routinely commented on the power of her telling and particularly on her punctuating or interspersing speech with song—by its nature an oral dimension of her narrative presentation.¹¹ Over the years of researching my biography of Anne Braden, I had occasion to observe her deliver her personal narrative on dozens if not scores of occasions to diverse groups of listeners. Although I rarely (if ever) recorded her interactions with her audience in any manner even

approaching methodical, I was struck by how routinely powerful were the responses to her telling of her own story and by the frequency of intense interpersonal encounters that followed in audience discussions or at the end of a program.

If nothing else, the spoken words of Menchu, Braden, and Hamer call into play the performative aspects of personal narratives employed for political ends. For Hamer, the addition of song has been crucial to how audiences received her speeches emotionally. For Menchu, traditional Quiche dress and use of a translator influenced my own and other North Americans' reactions to the story. In the case of Braden (who had excelled in the theater in college), the performative elements are perhaps less striking, but the contours of her narrative have a consistency over several decades' duration—without ever seeming “canned” or rehearsed—that is interesting. Her story is also different from the other two in its emphasis on her “conversion” from conventional southern white post-war society. Her oral delivery contained a tone of atonement—a quality not quite but almost ministerial—that seemed to enhance the story's power by relating it to southern religion, historically an influential force in southern culture.

Empowerment Narratives

Since Menchu, Braden, and Hamer deployed their stories mainly—or at least centrally—for the purpose of movement-building, their accounts are also what sociologist Robert Benford has called “participant narratives” because they are created and reproduced within the movement.¹² I would suggest that these three narratives and others like them might fruitfully be delineated further as “empowerment narratives” because the plot structure of each of the three stories moves from its author's disfranchisement, impoverishment, and stasis to strength, substance, and resistance.

Empowerment narratives such as these also connect to another body of work known as “trauma narratives” insofar as each woman's story situates her within a painful and problematic youth and turns on her emergence from its trauma.¹³ In Menchu's case, her childhood was one of poverty, malnutrition, coffee-picking, exploitation, and loss resulting from the savagery of the Guatemalan army against her parents and brother. Similarly, Fannie Lou Hamer was one of twenty children born to a poor sharecropping family on a Mississippi plantation whose owner put her to work picking cotton when she was only six years old. Hamer's first four decades were spent largely resigned to an unyielding form of segregation and racial hierarchy reinforced with violence in order to deter challenges to the system. At age 42, having endured flagrant racism, back-breaking field work, and the concomitant loss of two pregnancies, Hamer was also involuntarily sterilized, one of thousands of women of color to be subjected to that procedure.

Braden's narrative presents a departure from the other two women's

systematic deprivation insofar as she grew up in relative privilege even amid the Great Depression. Loved and supported by her middle-class southern family, Braden was a happy, deeply religious child with only glimpses of the moral dilemmas she would confront as a young adult. The beneficiary of an education at an elite Virginia women's college, she began, in 1945, a promising career in newspaper journalism back home in Alabama. Her suffering was not economic but psychological and moral as covering the Birmingham courthouse beat revealed to her the two separate and unequal forms of justice meted out to whites and blacks, for whom “ravishment” (incidents in which an African American man looked longingly at or refused to show deference to a white woman) was still a capital crime at that time in Alabama. As Braden began to notice the everyday degradations that southern white culture visited on blacks, she also observed the blatant perversions of Christian principles on which segregation depended and which her white friends and family tolerated with denial, dysfunction, or drink. The result was a kind of sickness she later characterized in her 1958 memoir as “of the spirit,” writing that “finally I came to realize that no one can go untouched by segregation in the South . . . Either you find a way to oppose the evil, or the evil becomes a part of you and you are a part of it, and it winds itself about your soul like the arms of an octopus.”¹⁴ One might reasonably ask whether such trauma was less profound than the sorts that involve violence or wreak physical suffering, but in Braden's account, the experience clearly caused her considerable anguish and prompted a sharp turn in her life's direction.

The empowerment that follows the trauma in each of these three narratives works on several levels. The most salient is in the plot. All three narrators resolve the traumas of their early lives with resistance that originates from and brings them into a collective movement for change. Menchu became politicized gradually throughout her youth *vis-à-vis* the close community of Indian peasants among whom her father was a leader in organizing an agricultural workers' union. Braden's awareness of her complicity with southern racial hierarchy evolved slowly as she entered adulthood, but she renounced her earlier values and immersed herself in anti-racist and working-class activism soon after meeting for the first time others working collectively for racial and economic change. The galvanizing factor, perhaps, was her love for the man who became her husband, Carl Braden, a Marxist and labor journalist with whom she formed a lifelong partnership based not only on romance but on a shared commitment to social action.

Hamer's embrace of resistance was the most dramatic, and in some ways the most unexpected of the three. Forty-four years old, she threw off what appeared to be resignation to the oppressive conditions of her life in the Mississippi delta almost immediately after her first encounter with the young voter-registration activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who arrived in her town in 1962. The day she first tried to register, Hamer

failed the literacy test and was denied. The bus she and other would-be registrants rode on was stopped and ticketed. Then the day ended with threats from her employer-landlord of eighteen years so intimidating that she left home and went into hiding rather than back down. "If SNCC hadn't of come into Mississippi, there never would have been a Fannie Lou Hamer," she said in speeches and interviews later.¹⁵ Within weeks she had been brought into SNCC's inner circles, and began traveling the South to organize. That story of her empowerment became one of the tools through which she recruited others.

While retracing their own processes of empowerment, Braden's, Hamer's, and Menchu's projects were at their vital center about empowering those who heard or read them toward greater understanding of and participation in organized forms of resistance. The issues and campaigns on which the three women sought to raise others' consciousness were different (though overlapping). Yet, these three empowerment narratives share a structural feature beyond that of plot development. In each case, the narrator weaves her own individual life plot—whose contours I have roughly tracked—with a more generalized political and economic critique of racism, of sexism, and ultimately of capitalism. That layering effect is what produces the whole story, a story that may be reproduced and used for movement-building.

By placing her individual life plot at the center of what is, for the most part, an essentially political action, each of the narrators considered here also asserts the implicit claim, "I matter," or "My story is worth hearing." Ironically, perhaps, considering the humility that has been widely commented upon in all three women, each becomes not just an individual, but a kind of exemplar. Such tales invite others to put themselves in the narrator's position, to enter an empathic understanding that calls on shared humanity. To the extent that such narratives inspire or empower, they do so in ways that point more toward a move beyond differences than to the sort of appreciation of differences—or organizing based on one form of difference—that has animated identity-based politics of the past four decades or so. To use Braden as an example, speeches in which she recounted her personal narrative may have appealed most poignantly to whites, southerners, and women—and perhaps most poignantly of all to white southern women. But I have also observed and heard expressed an equally powerful impact her words had on African Americans. For some, her testimony revealed that white people could indeed share a worldview; for others, her very conversion represented the possibility of success for the cause of racial justice.

The final dimension of empowerment in these narratives is that of the self. Hamer, Menchu, and Braden were political women who employed their own narratives to create solidarity with listeners, as tools for fashioning collective identities and collective movements. Much of the focus of this chapter has been on their audiences, but what about themselves? Can telling one's story

ever ultimately fail to be about oneself? In the telling and re-telling of their empowerment journeys, each of the three was also defining, and redefining, herself.

That self no longer stood alone, however. Initially empowered by the first social movement organization she became a part of (for Menchu, the agricultural union; for Braden, the post-World War II southern Progressive Party; for Hamer, the SNCC), each experienced a sort of figurative death and rebirth within a more collective identity. Telling that story over and over became a source of renewed commitment, with the self reconstructed repeatedly in front of others who were or might become similarly committed and thus widening the collective. The story of each of the three soon became a familiar narrative to which others in the movement could refer or rely upon. Anne Braden used to love the phrase, "No turning back." For a white woman, even one like Braden—who was repeatedly excoriated as a Communist and a race-traitor—turning back was probably more of a possibility than it was for either Menchu or Hamer.

Yet telling one's story could become, for them all, a way of anchoring the self to the movement. The literary scholar and novelist Carolyn Heilbrun has argued that women write themselves into existence through autobiography.¹⁶ For these women, and for others whose personal narratives have become forces for changing the world, the same may be true of storytelling.

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Notes

- 1 I . . . *Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, edited and introduced by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray (New York: Verso, 1984) was the first English-language edition. The text was initially published in 1983 in Spanish.
- 2 Fred Hobson advances this terminology and analyzes such narratives by a variety of white southerners, Braden included, in his *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1999).
- 3 Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Dutton, 1993), 85. Mills's book gives a full account of the synopsis of Hamer's work offered here. Her speech to the Credentials Committee of the 1964 Democratic Party convention appears on pp. 119–20.
- 4 Francesca Polletta, "Plotting Protest: Mobilizing Stories in the 1960 Student Sit-Ins," in

- Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements*, ed. Joseph E. Davis (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 31–52 (quoted 48).
- 5 Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, “Conjunctions: Life Narratives in the Field of Human Rights,” *Biography* 27:1 (Winter 2004):3.
 - 6 Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), esp. 175.
 - 7 Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), quoted in Schaffer and Smith, “Conjunctions,” 21.
 - 8 See, for example, Shari Benstock’s essay, “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” in her *The Private Self* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1988), 10–33. The Personal Narratives Group uses a different term but takes a similar position in its collectively authored *Interpreting Women’s Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
 - 9 Anne Braden, *The Wall Between* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1958; reissued Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); see n. 1 for the citation for Menchu’s book.
 - 10 The conflicts provoked around Menchu’s book appeared in various periodicals both scholarly and popular soon after the publication of a 1998 volume by anthropologist David Stoll, repudiating the factual accuracy of portions of her story. The most complete accounting of the dispute and the commentaries it prompted (including Stoll’s response to the compilation) appear in Arturo Arias’s edited collection, *The Rigoberta Menchu Controversy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). Most recently, Schaffer and Smith summarize the contestations surrounding the Menchu book on pp. 16–18 of “Conjunctions.”
 - 11 See, for example, the interviews used in Mills, *This Little Light*, and in many that refer to Hamer in Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
 - 12 Robert D. Benford, “Controlling Narratives and Narratives as Control within Social Movements,” in Davis (ed.), *Stories of Change*, 54.
 - 13 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a deeper analysis of these works as trauma narratives, but it would be interesting to speculate on those connections. For more on women’s trauma narratives, see, for example, Suzette Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).
 - 14 Braden, *Wall Between* (1999 edition), 13 & 30.
 - 15 Mills, *This Little Light*, 41. The biographical material earlier in this paragraph comes from Ch. 2.
 - 16 Carolyn Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).

Further Reading

Anne Braden Institute: www.louisville.edu/annebradeninstitute

Trafficking Trauma Intellectual Property Rights and the Political Economy of Traumatic Storytelling in South Africa

CHRISTOPHER J. COLVIN

“Signs of Injury” in Circulation

In the last two decades, the scope of intellectual property law has been greatly expanded to include a variety of objects, images, and ideas that might be called “cultural property.”¹ Songs, artworks, stories, graphic designs, totems, and ritual artifacts have increasingly been brought under the umbrella of a variety of “rights regimes” that seek to protect the rights, especially of marginalized indigenous groups, to maintain control over and benefit materially from these “objects/products” of their culture.² This chapter considers a particular—and perhaps peculiar—cultural form that is only now beginning to emerge as a form of intellectual property in need of “protection.”

Traumatic storytelling is an increasingly common activity in post-conflict, democratizing societies, an activity that produces an ever-expanding volume of narratives of traumatic suffering and recovery. These narratives, solicited by truth commissions, journalists, academics, and therapists, now circulate the world through particular relations of production, exchange, and consumption and structure—what I describe below as a “global political economy of traumatic storytelling.” Some victim-storytellers in South Africa are pushing for the recognition of these stories as a form of intellectual property and are seeking a variety of protections against the manipulation and marketization of their stories of abuse. How this situation came about and what it might mean for the public sphere’s engagement with images and narratives of abuse are the subjects of this chapter.

My first encounter with these disillusioned “victims of the TRC” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission), as they sometimes identified themselves, came through the monthly meetings of the Khulumani Support Group, a victim support and advocacy group in Cape Town. Khulumani is composed of victims of apartheid-era political violence and the Cape Town group was started in coordination with the Cape Town Trauma Centre, a non-governmental organization (NGO) offering trauma debriefing and counseling to victims of