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From Locus Amoenus to Locus Horribilis: Provincial and Urban Spaces of Cultural (Re)Assertion and Hegemony in Yates and Sigel’s When the Mountains Tremble and Bustamante’s Ixcanul

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From *Locus Amoenus* to *Locus Horribilis*: Provincial and Urban Spaces of Cultural (Re)Assertion and Hegemony in Yates and Sigel’s *When the Mountains Tremble* and Bustamante’s *Ixcanul*

By Katrina B. Abad

The separation or intersection of rural and urban spaces, and more importantly how their dynamic is represented in literature and film, lend critical understanding to the process of modernity and its resistance by grassroots movements. Of particular relevance to this study is Ernst Robert Curtius’s theory of *locus amoenus* and *locus horribilis* (Latin for ‘the idyllic place’ and ‘the hellish place,’ respectively). This theory identifies literary and artistic renditions of rural spaces with fertile ground, trees, sunlight and water as depicting a space of heavenly refuge, while more darkened, cramped, and urbanized spaces surrounded with heat and steel compose the mundane incarnation of hell (Curtius 195, 201). As the religious connotations of such an interpretation would suggest, the purity of the province is derived from its undeveloped state—and therefore its proximity to nature and to God—whereas the city (or the semi-urbanized) has been tainted by the advent of manmade structures, attitudes and ideals. While the theory of *locus amoenus* and *horribilis* is most closely associated with Christian-influenced literature from ancient Latin and medieval European canons (195), it is interesting to note the resurfacing of mimetic tropes in modern and contemporary world literature and film. Marcelo Ferrari’s *Sub Terra* (2004), for example, is a portrait of Chilean miners who struggle against exploitation, destitution and death; in so doing, the film clearly delineates between the solace that the laborers find in the ‘pristine’ meadows and brooks where they dance and form community bonds, and the terror and abuse they face in the underground tunnels of coal and explosions. The stark contrast of spaces suggests an underlying denouncement of the ‘invasion’ of the innocent provincials by the avaricious and oppressive mine owners, who likely represent modernity’s push toward a capitalist and urbanized system in the pan-Latin American vision.
The conversation on spaces, however, extends well beyond the passive ‘conquest’ of the virgin land and its inhabitants: in the context of contemporary Latin American studies, it is just as germane to examine if and how the province fights back, if such resistance succeeds, and if so, to what extent the rural space can return to its formerly pristine condition. The terms I employ in these questions are just as literal as they are metaphorical. By “virgin” and “pristine” I mean undeveloped and natural, but also self-sufficient and culturally intact; by “tainted” and “urbanized” I mean dependent on mass labor and production, built on a hierarchy of socioeconomic classes, and above all exploited by the cultural and economic hegemony across Latin America. Two films I find particularly apropos to the study of these clashing spaces are *When the Mountains Tremble*, a 1983 documentary by Pamela Yates and Newton Thomas Sigel with the collaboration of Rigoberta Menchú; and *Ixcanul*, the 2015 independent drama and directorial debut of Jayro Bustamante. Both are set in Guatemala but speak to different points in the country’s timeline on the issue of indigenous people’s human rights, thereby highlighting the persistence of the invasion of *locus horribilis* into *locus amoenus* from the twentieth century to the twenty-first. In my comparative analysis of these two works, I postulate that indigenous cultural erasure and economic exploitation by the hegemony are some of the grave consequences of such an imbrication of spaces; and I conclude that, as illustrated by both films, once contaminated by *locus horribilis*, the pristine and self-sufficient refuge of *locus amoenus* can no longer exist as it did before.

Undeniably, a long-standing academic controversy has overshadowed the purported veracity of the events presented in *When the Mountains Tremble*. It is the same polemic that generally characterizes works of a testimonial nature. “The question of testimonio—testimonial narrative,” writes John Beverley, “intertwines the ‘desire for objectivity’ and ‘the desire for solidarity’ in its very situation of production, circulation, and reception” (Beverley 571). Critics
and scholars such as Guillermina Walas agree that the very role of the testigo, or witness-narrator, can either construct a compelling truth or cast doubt on the ‘facts’ recounted. However, in analyzing I, Rigoberta Menchú, the textual basis for When the Mountains Tremble, Beverley also suggests that the truth in a testimonial work may not matter as much as its themes and goals:

[The narrator Rigoberta Menchú’s] interest in the text is not to have it become an object for us, our means of getting the ‘whole truth’—‘toda la realidad’—of her experience. It is rather to act tactically in a way she hopes and expects will advance the interest of the community and social groups and classes her testimonio represents: ‘poor’ (in her own description) Guatemalans. (579)

In the same manner that Beverley ventures to forgive veracity in favor of the socio-political intent and effect of I, Rigoberta Menchú, I would extend his outlook to include When the Mountains Tremble. While the documentary format by definition might imply a heavier responsibility to represent the truth, it is also reasonable to analyze any film as the product of a specific socio-political vision and therefore expect any historical reenactments in the documentary to reflect such bias. Teresa Longo finds the reenactments and trenchant narrative statements in When the Mountains Tremble to in fact lend clarity to the audience’s understanding of historical context (Longo 79)—an assertion with which I concur. Furthermore, the debate over the accuracy of data and reenacted scenes between politicians in the documentary do little, if at all, to inform the independent analysis of rural and urban spaces as they appear in every frame.

It is of significant interest that Rigoberta Menchú, the same witness-narrator behind Elizabeth Burgos’s I, Rigoberta Menchú, is one of the two principal narrators of When the Mountains Tremble. Hearing Menchú’s direct narrative voice, to some extent, gives life to her viewpoint that the mountains and highlands of her hometown Chimel embody the ‘virgin’ state of the indigenous culture of her fellow Quiché people. Menchú opens with the following eloquent elegy of her birthplace:
La aldea, es la aldea Chimel, donde yo nací. Precisamente mi tierra es casi un paraíso de todo lo lindo que es la naturaleza en esos lugares ya que no hay carreteras, no hay vehículos. Sólo entran personas. Para transportar las cargas son los caballos o nosotros mismos… Yo casi vivo en medio de muchas montañas… En primer lugar, mis padres se ubicaron desde el año 1960, ahí, y ellos cultivaron la tierra. Era montañoso donde no había llegado ninguna persona. (Burgos 22; Yates and Sigel; emphasis added)

As emphasized by Menchú, the mountains are characterized by isolation—a prized and desired kind of solitude that is reminiscent of the biblical garden of Eden. The Christian account of the Creation reads: “And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden… And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food… And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Genesis 2:8-9, 15 KJV). In these two passages the parallelisms between Eden and Chimel become apparent. Both spaces, in addition to requiring the manual cultivation of their inhabitants, offer isolation as a haven from the human corruptions of the world. As Menchú speaks, the camera pans over idyllic views of the lush highlands, where a Quiché village tends to its crops, washes clothing in a babbling brook and moves about at a leisurely pace, all dressed in the traditional garb of its culture. This opening montage, which is the only of its kind until, arguably, the end of the documentary, creates for the viewer an overarching sense of security, simplicity and contentment with its pacific music, Menchú’s voiceover and the filmic depiction of isolation. It is this very safety found in solitude that transforms both Chimel and Eden—or rather, that validates them—as heavenly spaces.

The psycho-emotional security which the Quiché people draw from their locus amoenus of Chimel is not rooted solely in its solitude, but also in a deeper symbolic significance originating from their culture and religion. According to traditional Quiché beliefs, the land itself is considered sacred and is personified as a deity that gives generously to mankind. “Before planting the corn, we ask permission of Mother Earth,” Menchú narrates (Yates and Sigel). The
practice is consistent with the Quiché doctrine that corn symbolizes the sprouting of the human race from the earth, and that therefore the corn and the land deserve veneration. As hinted at in the documentary but also further detailed in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, even the water, the trees, the beasts and the sun are relegated religious symbolism; the water, which is “algo sagrado...es algo puro” (Burgos 80), infuses the highlands with a holy life force. The fertility brought by this sacredly perceived water once again parallels the fruit of the garden of Eden, which is surrounded by three rivers that make “good gold” out of the land (Genesis 2:11-14). Thus the sanctity attributed to the provincial space of Chimel, particularly its land, crops and water, further highlights the similarities of the Quiché homeland to a *locus amoenus*.

The details Menchú shares about religious rituals and perceptions of the land are, beyond a simple recognition of the aboriginal Quiché faith, also a declaration and assertion of the birth culture. In “Grounding Self and Action: Land, Community, and Survival in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*…”, Mayumi Toyosato articulates this relationship between land and cultural identity thus:

In these narratives, the land plays a part in the formulation of agency and collective action, and the narrators’ discursive connections to the land and the communities create a space for imagining or reconsidering resistance for cultural survival. The land is not simply a metaphor of one’s community or history, but a material entity which embodies ethical consciousness or cultural practices for the continuance of life. (Toyosato 296-97)

Indeed, Toyosato’s analysis is an apt one when we consider the solidarity portrayed onscreen in *When the Mountains Tremble* through religious processions, church sermons and birthday rituals. Although the Christian faith with which Menchú and some of her fellow villagers identify is admittedly a syncretic form of the Quiché faith and Catholicism, in the words of an anonymous missionary priest, the blended Christianity is still “taught to them [the Quiché] as a form of
“resistance” (Yates and Sigel) and therefore concretizes, rather than dissolves, the community ties and cultural ‘purity’ in the highlands.

Identifying the same unequivocal traces of a provincial *locus amoenus* in Bustamante’s *Ixcanul* presents a more difficult task, since the narrative voice falls almost solely on María, a young Quiché woman who at first appears to despise her mountainous homeland for subjecting her to poverty and a sense of entrapment. María’s sentiment is illustrated by dismal lighting throughout the first two thirds of the film, as well as the motif of a sow and a boar being forced to mate in much the same way that María has been arranged to be married to Ignacio, a plantation foreman, for the financial security of her family. Bustamante even succeeds in communicating a certain lethargy through the slow-panning shots of the highlands which are, at once, vibrant yet desolate. Despite the undeniable beauty of the trees, meadows and brook—key components of a *locus amoenus*—María’s father laments that the land is “hostile” and “infertile” and “full of serpents” (Bustamante). His words are punctuated by the repetitive thud of his axe against wood, as if audio-visually demonstrating the interminable grind of the family and the village. Amalia Córdova writes that the film is an accurate microcosm of the country’s crisis as a whole, “at a time when Indigenous peoples in Guatemala continue to suffer widespread poverty and inequality, racism and marginalization, with limited spaces for political participation, 20 years after the signing of the Peace Accords” (Córdova 114). She further summarizes the film as “bring[ing] us new visions of Indigenous life, with non-professional actors conveying hard-hitting truths about the impact of colonization and neoliberal agendas on Indigenous communities” (115). What we glimpse on the plantation in *Ixcanul*, then, is no longer the *locus amoenus* in its previous pristine condition; rather, it is the space of the in-between, having been invaded by the exploitative work on the plantation brought by the *locus horribilis*. 
What the Quiché mountainlands still retain of their previous *locus amoenus* state in *Ixcanul* is the villagers’ perception of their sanctity. The title of the film, which translates to “volcano” in Quiché, is a reference to the blackened volcano where María and her family leave offerings to the spirits to grant their prayers for a blessed wedding, a more fertile land and the annihilation of the serpents. In contrast with the festive processions in *When the Mountains Tremble*, however, religion and its connection to the land appear less palpable and more hollow in *Ixcanul*: the backdrop of the prostrated figures is marked by ash, and none of the prayers brought forth throughout the diegesis are fulfilled as expected. Indeed, from María’s eyes, the entire rituality of the people’s existence feels futile, almost outdated. Each time her mother rubs María’s naked body with oil, or circles her belly with heated stones and chanted prayers to rid her of the at-first unwanted child inside, María’s visage of hopelessness mirrors the mood of the barely lit scenery and the failed ceremonies. At conflict with herself, María vacillates between adhering to the ancient Quiché teachings about the existence of the volcano spirits and rejecting them as primitive in favor of the adventure and opportunity she longs for in the great urban unknown beyond the American border.

María’s descent into the *locus horribilis* of the city is rapid and, to a certain measure, ironic. The venom of a snake bite on the plantation endangers her life; the hospital, dark and cramped and teeming with voices in a language the Quiché family does not understand, becomes her savior. The central tragedy that ensues in María’s brief encounter with the city is the kidnapping of her unborn daughter. Although the sacred land has betrayed her through the unfortuitous infestations of serpents, the city’s sin against María is far greater: it is the great moment of disillusionment that nearly drives her to the brink of madness. It is María’s naïveté that has led her to mistakenly believe that the province is a trap by virtue of the fact that it is a province with antiquated beliefs and cyclical poverty; but in fact, what she has suffered is the
invasion of *locus horribilis* into her *locus amoenus*, long before she was born, with the arrival of plantation owners and the pressing need to survive in the midst of an increasingly unproductive land. Yet the second invasion of *locus horribilis* that takes place in the hospital, and later the police precinct, is far more personal than a systematic exploitation of laborers like Pepe, the father of her child; it is a violation of María’s rights as a mother and a woman with a formerly idealistic view of the world outside the province.

The overarching aesthetic of *Ixcanul* is that of gray, a shade of in-between that colors with ambiguity every scene of a traveling body or a transition between rural and urban. Are we witnessing a vestige of *locus amoenus*, or has it been completely overtaken? How can the city be identified as *locus horribilis* with such certainty if the medical advances of the modern world have saved María’s life? At first glance, elements of each space seem to appear in the other, suggesting a mutual invasion, or perhaps a mutual influence, if we are to consider that *locus amoenus* does not possess the same weaponry and aggression as the *horribilis*. Upon closer inspection, however, we realize that the province’s conversion into a ‘space in-between’ aligns with Giorgio Agamben’s and Michel Foucault’s work on interstices: the gaps between two extremes or binaries, and more importantly, the people and land that fill that space in between.²

If *locus amoenus* were to represent life, for example, and *horribilis* were to represent death, then the plantation on which the Quiché in *Ixcanul* work and live could be considered the space of the ‘living dead’—or more accurately, neither living nor dead. In the same vein, the space of María’s mountainous homeland and the plantation hangs in the balance between undeveloped and forcibly modernized, between self-sufficient and exploited: between virgin and defiled.

The dynamic between urban and rural spaces in *When the Mountains Tremble* is much less subtle. There is no gradual melding of *loci*—only a visible, physical clash. Footage of violent encounters between protesters and policemen in the capital highlights the city as the site
of highest tensions between modernity and grassroots movements. The camera sweeps over smoke and flames, military forces beating demonstrators with batons and dragging them away, even gassing innocent bystanders. Torture and death are the unspoken words behind the footage; resistance to hegemony is its language. The city, however, is not the only space that struggles to contain the conflicts. Just as María’s province in *Ixcanul* has transformed into a space of in-between, so have the highlands of Menchú’s hometown, where the military is stationed to govern the indigenous people’s movements and conduct random searches for subversives and guerrillas.

“We are going to tell you exactly what to do,” one soldier announces to an assembly of Quiché villagers; “No faces, because if you don’t behave, you know what will happen… You are going to watch for any person who seems suspicious, or who tries to leave town with anything” (Yates and Sigel). What was once safe, isolated and Elysian, like the garden of Eden where neither man nor evil could enter, has now fallen into the hands of the hegemony, such that self-organization and resistance must be made with utmost discretion. Menchú summarizes the timeline of the invasion of *locus horribilis* thus: “Since the Spanish stole our ancestors’ land over five hundred years ago, we have suffered so much injustice” (Yates and Sigel). Such injustice, indeed, that even the Quiché women feel the need to organize alongside the male guerrillas to “combat the Army of the rich,” and in doing so attempt to restore the sanctity of their *locus amoenus*.

Does effective resistance truly exist for the indigenous people of Menchú’s and María’s worlds? Gustavo V. García notes that the efforts of missionary priests to Chimel results in “[un] modelo para usar e incorporar *La Biblia* a la cultura e ideología indígena” (García 140). It is a missionary effort based on a Christianity that teaches Christ as a figure of resistance, writes García, and the syncretized result blends almost seamlessly into the Quiché objective of fighting to preserve tradition. Indeed, in the words of Menchú, the ability of her co-leaders in the indigenous rights movement to understand the parallelisms between their travails and the
struggles of ‘Christ the fighter’ foments an effective “self-defense of the village.” García acquiesces that the incorporation of Christianity into the guerrillas’ ideology has in fact proved to be an efficacious mechanism in promoting survival and victory in “la lucha cotidiana” (140).

_Ixcanul_ cannot be said to present the same level of optimism. The sole glimmer of hope is reflected in the blinding sunlight on the ride back from the hospital to the mountains and during María’s period of grieving, as if she is only now beginning to recognize the sanctity and security of her blemished _locus amoenus_. But that hope is short-lived: against swiftly darkening skies and grayed-out frames, we discover that the city betrays María a second time when her family seeks the assistance of the police in finding the missing infant, only to be threatened with charges of child trafficking. Left with no other recourse than to return to the mountains with the cold words, “She’s still young; she can have more children if she wants” (Bustamante), María finds herself back at precisely the same point where she started in the opening of the film: preparing to wed Ignacio against her will. All of María’s individual efforts to resist the hegemony—whether by running away, having a child with an emigrant laborer to the US, or demanding justice for the hospital that stole her daughter—are rendered futile. The fight against the systematic violation of the indigenous people’s rights, says Bustamante both narratively and visually, is but a cycle.

Yates and Sigel contend in _When the Mountains Tremble_ that organization and solidarity are key to driving back the _locus horibilis_ and restoring the indigenous highlands to a _locus amoenus_; but at the practical and legislative level, little to nothing has been done to protect plantation workers’ rights to fair wages and prevent child labor exploitation (Bureau of International Labor Affairs; Pratt 61). _Ixcanul_, by contrast, paints a grim portrait of verisimilitude, thereby underscoring the gravity of the contamination of the Quiché’s once sacred lands and self-sufficient existence by modernity and the hegemony. In light of this, the words of one of Menchú’s fellow resistance leaders seem idealistic: “The road to this war has been four
hundred years in the making… We say every road has a coming and a going, a leaving and a returning… We don’t travel this road alone. There can be no returning unless everyone, Indians and non-Indians, go together” (Yates and Sigel). Yet as illustrated by *Ixcanul* and even, ironically, by the systemic sufferings of the Quiché documented in *When the Mountains Tremble*, there can be no true returning to the idyllic space of ages past. The conquest of *locus horribilis* has so crippled the self-sufficiency and security of *locus amoenus* that complete restoration is nigh impossible. The hope of the Quiché lies, then, in the patient and tireless fight for equality; the support of fighters and activists beyond the Quiché community; and the understanding that the ‘space in-between’ once born of *locus amoenus* may not revert to its untainted state, but rather will evolve into a new and hybrid world that may be more just to its underprivileged indigenous citizens.
Notes

1. Drawn from Guillermina Walas’s “Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú: Una voz desde la subalternidad.” *Celehis: Revista del Centro de Letras Hispanoamericanas* 4.4-5 (1995): 81-90. Print. Although Walas states that her analysis does not address the controversy about the truth of Menchú’s narration in the original textual *testimonio*, she acknowledges the existence of the polemic and its contribution to other academic analyses of the validity of the construction of subalternity of Menchú and the Quiché.

2. I refer to Michel Foucault’s “Vigilar y castigar: Nacimiento de la prisión” (1975) and Giorgio Agamben’s *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience* (1993). Agamben’s book centers more on the concept of interstices between binaries, or the state of being in-between, in relation to collective trauma and postmemory (such as in cases of the Holocaust and, by extension, the disappeared under Latin American dictatorships). I extend his conceptualization of interstices to include spaces such as *loci amoeni et horribili* and the product of their clash or melding, which can be a space and a people that are uncertain of their identity and future.

3. Of relevance to García’s point is the following quote: “Su exégesis, el diálogo crítico y liberador freiriano, está subordinada a la categoría cíclica del tiempo maya-quiché: el ‘reino grande’ prometido en un futuro ahistórico no tiene ningún atractivo para el sujeto subalterno que se debate en una realidad que lo margina y explota” (140). In essence, García analyzes the Maya-Quiché religious perception and/or conceptualization of time as cyclical and asserts that the present Quiché cannot accept the recent marginalization and exploitation of their people because such systematic oppression by foreign invaders did not take place in their history. As a result, says García, some Quiché have followed in Menchú’s footsteps and turned to a version of Christianity which teaches “Christ the fighter” as a way to understand and address the current threat to their people.
Works Cited


*Ixcanul*. Dir. Jayro Bustamante. La Casa de Production and Tu Vas Voir Productions, 2015. Film.


