

Guatemala and the U.S.: Interactions, Contributors, and Intersectionality



In 1823, President James Monroe proclaimed what has come to be called the “Monroe Doctrine.” It amounted to a declaration to the world that the United States would not tolerate any European power getting involved in the affairs of the Americas, and that he/we considered the Americas the sphere of influence of the U.S. alone. Since 1823, the United States has acted to carry out and defend this “doctrine” multiple times. In Guatemala in 1954, the United States supported a coup d’etat which ousted left-leaning and popular leaders and installed a military regime that led to a succession of military dictatorships in that country. The military

dictatorships were favored by European-descended inhabitants of Guatemala—along with the U.S. corporation, the United Fruit Company. The previous left-leaning governments had been supported by, and favored the interests of, the poorer farmers and indigenous people of Guatemala. These were people of Mayan heritage. What followed was an extremely long period of violence, repression, and, from 1960 to 1996, civil war in Guatemala.

Although since 1996 Guatemala has been relatively more peaceful, poverty remains a serious challenge in that country. According to the World Bank, 59.3% of the population lives below the poverty line. Among indigenous peoples in Guatemala, the poverty rate is 79%, and 40% of indigenous peoples live in “extreme poverty.” This goes a long way toward explaining why many people from Guatemala seek to emigrate elsewhere—looking for social and economic security. Consider the emigration/immigration pattern to the U.S. from Guatemala represented in the graph below, and note the rapid upturn in immigration that started in the mid-1950s and that continues today. Note also that this graph does not include people who immigrated without documentation.

Immigration from Guatemala, 1930-2008

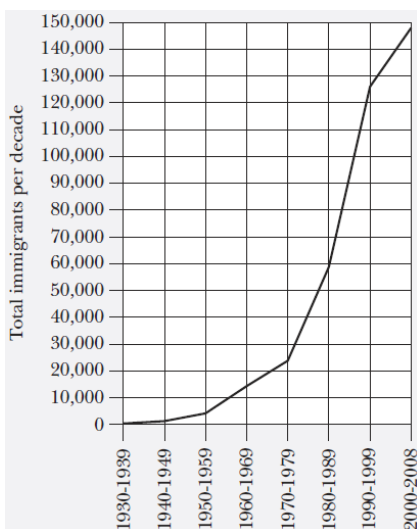


Chart Source: Department of Homeland Security, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2008. Figures include only immigrants who obtained legal permanent resident status.

There are notable Guatemalan immigrants who came to the U.S. for reasons other than social or economic security. Two notable Guatemalan Americans are Oscar Isaac and Luis von Ahn. Isaac is a famous actor who starred in the Star Wars movies and plays a leading role in the upcoming film version of the novel, *Dune*. Luis von Ahn came to the U.S. from Guatemala City to study. He has since developed the award-winning language-learning platform known as *Duolingo*, and the internet security tool reCAPTCHA. But the large majority of Guatemalan people coming to the United States are doing so because they are fleeing poverty and/or oppression. Things are not easy for indigenous Mayan populations in Guatemala.

One of the most famous indigenous Guatemalans who has had to flee her country off and on due to her political activism is Rigoberta Menchu—the winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. She belongs to the Mayan ethnic identity known as K'iche'. Born in 1959, she comes from the northern highlands of Guatemala and grew up doing farm work every day, and also worked on large coffee plantations harvesting the beans. She became active in women's rights movements and social and economic reform movements in Guatemala. In her region, left-leaning revolutionaries were fighting the government, so she and her family became suspects and targets of the Guatemalan government during the civil war period.

In 1979, her brother was arrested, tortured and murdered by the army. The next year, her father was killed by Guatemalan security forces when they stormed the Spanish Embassy, where he and other poor farmers had taken refuge. Shortly afterwards, her mother died as a result of wounds she received after being arrested, tortured, and sexually assaulted by Guatemalan security forces. Rigoberta Menchu continued her activism by teaching herself Spanish and Mayan dialects outside her own K'iche', by organizing strikes against the government and plantation owners, and by teaching poor, rural indigenous peoples who faced violence and oppression from the military government. She has been a vocal advocate of the rights of Mayan peoples in Guatemala, founding opposition political movements there, going into exile in Mexico and the U.S. while continuing to speak up for human rights in her home country. She even has returned a number of times, when it was safer for her to do so, to Guatemala to run for president. She has faced threats and criticism for her actions, sexist and racist attacks from people in power, all while continuing to speak for education and economic rights of the indigenous Mayan peoples living in extreme poverty in Guatemala.

An important element to consider in the life of Rigoberta Menchu is the role of intersectionality. This means that she has multiple layers of identity that *intersect* in her identity, and all affect how she shows up in the world and how she is treated wherever she goes. She is a woman. She is K'iche'. She is Hispanic. She is Mayan.

Oftentimes when people see her, hear about her, or meet her, however, especially when she is in the U.S., they only see one dimension of who she is...maybe two: a 1) Hispanic 2) woman. This is certainly not all that the oppressive government of Guatemala—or the racist classes who held power--saw in her. They considered her a threat because she was poor, she was Mayan, she educated other Mayans, and she was an outspoken woman. And it is certainly not all that she sees in herself. When she considers who she is and therefore what her role is in the world, it is clear that she sees a woman, a K'iche', a Mayan, a farmer, an educator, a *citizen*. As we think about the imperatives of equity and inclusion in society, in the workplace, and in life, it would help us to remember all of the barriers that people and groups tried to erect around her to keep her in her "place" of poverty, and subjugated womanhood and voiceless Mayan identity. It makes us realize that there is another identity she has: a remarkable human dignity.