



Mothers,  
Widows and  
Guerrilleras

*Anonymous  
Conversations  
with Survivors  
of State Terror*

*Victoria Sanford*

ALSO THROUGHT  
(GIVE IT BACK!)

# MOTHERS, WIDOWS AND GUERILLERAS

Anonymous Conversations with  
Survivors of State Terror

Victoria Sanford

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Most importantly, I thank my Guatemalan friends who have shared with me the pain, joy, beauty and horror of their country. This report is dedicated to these unnamed men and women of Guatemala with the hope that one day Guatemala's truths can be revealed with the real names named and without fear of reprisal. Any errors or shortcomings in this article are, of course, mine alone.

## Foreword

By presenting the responses of women to the internal armed conflicts, which have consumed Guatemala for almost 30 years, as *struggles to survive state terror*, Victoria Sanford brings into the sharp light of day the political and military forces - the terror - within which Guatemalans have lived - a terror instigated by state forces to control a potentially rebellious populace. Following upon the US backed overthrow of the democratically elected President, Jacobo Arbenz, in 1954, various military dictatorships attempted to control Guatemala through assassinating those who openly opposed the military regimes: union leaders, church leaders, clerics, nuns, and laity, university professors and students, indigenous leaders. Those in opposition were often labeled 'subversives' or 'communists'. Selective assassinations were followed by counterinsurgency tactics against the Mayan peasants deemed to be both 'less than human' and susceptible to communist indoctrination. The 'scorched earth' campaign of President (General) Rios Montt (1982-1983), wiping out whole villages of indigenous peasants in the mountainous areas, was just one example of the violence of this repression. As the violence increased and spread, more and more people were killed, disappeared, tortured, threatened. Tens of thousands fled into exile as refugees. The society was terrorized.

State terror is pervasive, not localized. State terror is often faceless and thus difficult to identify or call to account. State terror has tremendous power at its disposal - the power to threaten, to intimidate, to oppress, to destroy, or to enforce silence. State terror causes extraordinary human suffering. The voices of these ordinary Guatemalan women interviewed by Victoria Sanford bring to light the reality of such broad-sweeping words, causing us to go beyond faceless statistics to the faces of very real individuals.

Those who remained struggled to survive. Some organized around a common vision, to end the war and contribute to the building of a more democratic Guatemala. All struggled to survive, to survive as whole people with hope, with a meaningful purpose to their lives, to survive as families, to protect their loved ones, to end the terror and the violence.

What does it mean, in fact, *to survive* state terror?

Guatemala has often been characterized as *the country of silence*. In a country experiencing pervasive economic injustice and a war against the indigenous Mayan population, the horror of the death squads, the fear of army violence, and the 'ears' among the indigenous rural population created a country where it was difficult to trust anyone. For many Guatemalans *silence has been a strategic tool for survival*.<sup>1</sup>

The voices of the anonymous survivors, made audible by Victoria Sanford, break in to this silence. The necessity of remaining anonymous demonstrates that the dangers embedded in violence are ever-present in the consciousness and in the realities of these women.

Listen to the words of these women who chose to survive. That is, they decided to act in response to the violence inflicted upon them directly and upon their loved ones and neighbors. Listen in gratitude to their bravery and their trust, trust in the interviewer, Victoria, and trust in us as listeners who will recognize their realities and honor their choices, choices as extreme as the circumstances from which they arise. That we, as listeners, are often from countries which tacitly supported the brutal counterinsurgency campaigns of successive Guatemalan military dictatorships challenges us to act so that our nations no longer support state terror inflicted upon those who challenge oppression.

The voices of these survivors illustrate poignantly that violence is not separate from the larger political, social, and economic forces that shape the lives of individuals and their communities. Violence becomes the 'air we breathe', shaping encounters, pressing out alternatives, insisting that we struggle for hope within limited options. For without hope one dies in spirit if not in the flesh. These stories illustrate in the lives of very ordinary Guatemalan women how state violence and repression are contested, contested at great danger to themselves and to their families. As Victoria Sanford states

The diversity of personal experiences offers an opportunity to witness the uniqueness of each individual experience while, at the same time, recognizing the myriad ways in which state terror wreaks havoc on the

very fabric of society, culture, community and family. These are the stories of ordinary people caught up in times of extraordinary violence.

Many scholars and activists are struggling to understand the effect of violence upon women and the role of women in countering violence. In fact, this publication grows out of such a project on the part of the Life & Peace Institute (LPI). Often, such efforts are shaped by pre-existing theories and political sensibilities.

The anonymous voices from Guatemala do not arise from theoretical or political frameworks. They arise from the lived experiences of women caught up in the terror of and the silencing within violence in their daily existence. As such, they raise difficult questions for us, the readers. How are voices that speak the truth about violence, that speak for justice, to be protected? What is the effect of silence in 'high places' upon the presence of violence in local communities? What are the alternatives for countering state violence? How is the silence within societies experiencing state terror broken and what is our role, as outsiders, in enabling breaking the silence? How do we listen to and learn to understand responses with which we do not agree?

Guatemala is not the only society that has experienced state-sponsored violence in recent decades. There are blatant examples such as Argentina and El Salvador, South Africa and Nigeria. There are more subtle examples in which people seem to be controlled through the threat of state violence such as Singapore or Saudi Arabia. Within the western industrialized societies, certain marginalized groups have expressed fear of state violence, for example, the *Roma* in Eastern Europe or young black males in the United States.

Thus, the experiences and responses of these anonymous Guatemalan women hold disturbing lessons for us all. Are we willing to recognize and name the violence in our own societies? Are we willing to look for the social, cultural, economic, and political bases for such violence? Are we willing to break the silence surrounding violence in our societies, recognizing that the violence which affects a few finally affects us all?

*Mothers, Widows and Guerrillas: Anonymous Conversations with Survivors of State Terror* is part of the ongoing analysis by the LPI on the issue of women and violence and the ways in which women can and do organize to shape nonviolent communities. In November 1993, a conference of women peace activists and researchers was held in Manila

<sup>1</sup> Jonsson, T. 'Foreword', *Litany of Pain: The Churches, Christians and Human Rights in Guatemala*, M. T. Ruiz-Hedström (ed.) (Life & Peace Institute: Uppsala, 1996) p. 4.

sponsored by the World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation, and the LPI. The women attending identified a number of themes, which need more analysis and urged continued study, publication, and discussion. In preparation for the conference a background analysis, *Women, War and Peace*, by Elizabeth Ferris was published as a research report. A collection of national case studies of women's organizing and several analytical essays, *Women, Violence, and Nonviolent Change*, A. Gnanadason, M. Kanyoro, and L. McSpadden (eds) has been published by the World Council of Churches and is being distributed by WCC and LPI.

Many persons contributed to this study. Anonymous reviewers provided reflections and suggestions which refined the analysis. Lena Sjöqvist, LPI Research Assistant, and Alan Frisk, LPI Editor, carried out the careful and detailed work needed to bring this manuscript to publication.

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Life & Peace Institute  
Uppsala, Sweden  
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## I. Rafael

*'The finest and most significant conversations of my life were anonymous.'*<sup>1</sup>  
- C.G. Jung

It is the summer of 1993 and I am sitting in a sparsely furnished apartment in Central Mexico. I am interviewing a 25 year-old medical student. He is Guatemalan. Though we meet through mutual friends in Mexico, it turns out that we have friends in common in California - immigration and human rights attorneys - attorneys with whom I have worked in the past, attorneys who represented Rafael in his case for political asylum in the United States. I am a graduate student in Anthropology trying to understand how state terrorism gets reproduced in Guatemala. Rafael is trying to make sense of his childhood experience of terror. I am extremely fortunate that he agrees to travel back through the terror of his youth and that he chooses to do so in a six-hour interview with me.<sup>2</sup>

I was 14 when I was captured on May 29, 1982. We had just set off a bag of political propaganda with firecrackers when we heard sirens. We ran away, got on a bus, got off the bus and got on another. Still, the sirens kept getting louder and louder. The police stopped the bus. They separated the men from the women. They searched everyone, then they called the three of us.

'We know who you are. Don't play stupid.' They began to beat us with the butts of their rifles. They were uniformed National Police. They pushed us into their car. As we drove away, one of them said, 'I want to cover you with gasoline and light a match. Then, you'd talk.'

They took us to the National Police Department of Investigations. After four hours of waiting in silence, they began to interrogate us. Then they locked us in a bathroom where we slept on the floor until early the next morning. When we awoke, they brought in two more students - they were high school students. They were badly beaten.

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<sup>1</sup> Jung, C.G. *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (Vintage Books: New York, 1989), p.134.

<sup>2</sup> All testimony (the words of those interviewed) is presented in quote form throughout this report.

Then, the police brought in a man. They accused him of stealing. He was tied up from head to toe. They filled the wash basin with piping hot water. Then they began slamming his head down hard into the sink and holding him under the hot water as he choked for air. Then they took the man away.

The police came back a little while later. They put a rubber hood on Francisco. They began to take each of us into the room next door, one-by-one. We could hear the punching and the kicking, and the shouting of the police, and the screams and moans of pain of each of our friends. They did this to me, too. It wasn't a systematic interrogation, they just kept shouting, 'Confess! Confess!'

The next day, things began to change. It was no longer the police torturing us. Now, there were men in army uniforms and they had a photo album. One-by-one, we were taken to an office and shown photos. 'Do you know him? Do you know her?' I saw a woman I had known, a high school student. She had left school, and gone to the mountains to join the guerrilla. They asked me, 'Do you know her?' I said, 'No.' 'Liar,' they said.

There were three military men around me. They would hit me, slam my face on the table and pull my hair, nothing more. I just kept saying, 'No.' Then, they began to say, 'Look, this one belongs to the Revolutionary Student Front. This one joined the guerrilla last year. We killed this one. And this one, well we have him.' The man with all the information looked like someone from the G-2.<sup>3</sup>

This same day, they captured two more students. They caught them downtown. There were three of them. One of them almost got away, but they shot him. They killed him. That same night, they caught my two sisters. Then they brought in Javier and Alejandra. They were all bruised and bloody from being beaten. None of us were allowed to speak. Tuesday morning, they brought in two more. It was a real hunt. A half an hour later, after my sisters arrived, they put the three of us together in an office with the Colonel. I say Colonel because that is what everyone called him. 'Look kids,' he said - he was playing the good guy - 'it's better if you talk. Nothing bad is going to happen to you. Don't worry, you just have to say a few little things and you'll be free. You haven't eaten have you?' We hadn't eaten since Saturday. He ordered a man in the room to bring us food and almost immediately

we were given Big Macs and french fries from McDonald's. But I ate very little. In these circumstances, even if you are hungry, you do not have much appetite.

He told Clara, my sister, that she should talk, that she was the oldest so she had to understand the situation, that she could save the lives of her little brother and sister. We each said we had nothing to say. The Colonel continued to play the role of the good guy. 'Look, we understand that you do these things for patriotism, for your country, because you have big hearts. But you have been manipulated by the guerrilla. They are delinquents provoking problems in the country. It is better if you talk.' But we didn't talk. We had nothing to say. 'Well,' he said, 'think about it. Tomorrow we talk.' They took each of us back to the room downstairs. We weren't permitted to speak to each other.

The next day, the Colonel continued interrogating us one-by-one. 'Who is your leader!?' We all began to give information. But it was all different because we were inventing it. When they realized this, they began to beat us, again.

That afternoon, Diego, Juan and Jose were captured at the Girl's High School. They had gone to visit their girlfriends. They tried to run away. The police caught Juan. Diego was machine-gunned down. Jose was able to slip into a private residence to hide, but the senora of the house walked out into the street shouting, 'Here's the youth! Here's the subversive!' The police caught him, too. But this isn't the version in the newspapers. In the papers, they said that unknown men who kidnap young students and take them to whereabouts unknown had been captured. Diego appeared dead a few days later with signs of torture and body parts missing. They had cut off his arms. Juan and Jose are still 'disappeared'. We did not yet know about Diego, Juan and Jose, nor did we know that they had captured Manolo and Gustavo in the park. We each thought we were the only ones captured because in the beginning we weren't all in the same place.

On Tuesday, they put a capucha (hood) over my head. I had heard that the capucha was when they put a plastic bag over your head, sit you in a chair and beat you. Each time you gasp for air from being hit in the stomach, you are asphyxiated slowly. What they did to me was this: they tied up my hands and feet altogether behind my back. They put a rubber hood over my head - there were no openings for my mouth, nose or eyes. I could just barely breathe. Then, they tied a cord that was connected to the hood to my hands and feet. Then they threw me face down on the floor and pulled the cord bending my back and

<sup>3</sup> The G-2 is the Guatemalan Army's Secret Police Unit.



contorting my body upwards unnaturally. I was hanging in this position. This produces a searing pain and at the same time, because of the rubber hood, you can't breathe. Then, they begin to ask you questions. They begin to torment you and you can't breathe. When you are asphyxiating, they drop you back down to the ground. You hit the ground hard. Then you take a breath and they pull you up again and hit you in the stomach to knock the air out of you. Then, up and down, up and down, over and over again. The punches aren't just in the abdomen, they're everywhere. Each time, right when you begin to asphyxiate, they drop you to the ground. Right as you start to take a breath, they pull you up and the rubber hood asphyxiates you and the beating starts again. "Talk, or we'll kill your sisters!" Even if you had something to say, you can't talk when you are asphyxiating with a rubber hood on your head. This torture is how they begin to break your moral character, to destroy your conscience. They did the same thing to my sisters, "Talk! Or we'll kill your little brother!"

The night after the torture, sometime around midnight - well, I suppose it was midnight, but the truth is I had begun to lose my sense of time - a group of men in their 30s were put in the room with us. We had never seen them before. They were robust, strong, and they had very mean faces. The first thing they said was, "You're from the FIL." We said, "What's the FIL?" We knew the FIL were the Irregular Forces of Liberation, a structure of the EGP.<sup>4</sup> They repeated, "You're from the FIL." We said, "We don't know anything about that." "Don't be assholes, you sons of bitches because you know what that means. You just wait." And they left.

A little while later they came back and said, "Blindfold them. We're taking them with us." All this time we were either tied up or in handcuffs. They called the handcuffs 'FBI handcuffs'. Every time you move, they tighten a little bit more on your wrists. So the more you move, the more they tighten. So you try not to move because they hurt. So we all had these handcuffs on our wrists and were surrounded by the men who were guarding us. When they said, "Blindfold them," it was in that moment that I said, "It's over. They're going to assassinate us." We all looked at each other.

I remember well the looks on the faces of my sisters - sadness, fear, dread. Looks that we had each reconciled ourselves with death, that the moment to die was upon us. Someone said, "At least we did something.

We did something to try to make the world a better place. Someone else can follow our example.' This brought a giant knot into my throat. My sisters began to cry. We all began to cry. We tried to embrace each other even though we had on those FBI handcuffs.

One-by-one, they blindfolded us. I was the last to be blindfolded. It was horrible. To see the expressions on the faces of my sisters and friends, the fear in their eyes and then not to see their eyes. These weren't blindfolds of cloth. There were newspapers with masking tape wrapped round and round your face and head. Each time one of us was blindfolded, the last glances were at each other. They were glances of farewell, eyes that said, "We'll never again see one another."

They took us downstairs and put us in a car. There were four other people in there, four other friends they had captured. We were packed one atop of the other on the floor of the car. "Don't talk because whoever speaks is dead." So we stopped whispering. Then we drove off.

They would stop the car and say, "Here, we'll get rid of one here." We were shaking with fear. Then, they would begin to laugh and drive on. They did this several times until we reached a house. I heard the gates open and we drove in. We got out of the car and it was very cold. Blindfolded and handcuffed we walked up some stairs into a house. Immediately upon entering the house, life became even more gloomy and obscure. With the blindfold, it was already obscure, but entering the house everything seemed to be consumed into darkness. The odor was horrible, a mixture of blood, urine and excrement - the screams and moans of people being tortured - a terrible thing. We knew this was what awaited us. This was perhaps the biggest blow.

For two weeks, the Guatemalan military illegally detained and tortured Rafael and his 10 friends in this clandestine jail. Of the 4 girls and 7 boys, all students ranging in age from 14-18, 4 girls and 4 boys survived. It is known that one boy died in the clandestine jail. One 17 year-old boy and one 16 year-old boy have never again been seen. They are among Guatemala's 100,000 dead or disappeared. In a state of terror, this is every woman's fear, every mother's nightmare and a reality for far too many. During the 1980s, the lives of Guatemalan women were imbued with the torture, disappearance and assassination of children, relatives, friends and neighbors. No family was left untouched by state violence.

<sup>4</sup> The EGP is the *Ejercito Guerrillero de los Pobres*, Guerrilla Army of the Poor.

## I. The history of terror

Guatemala's contemporary history of terror begins with the US-backed overthrow of democratically-elected President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, followed by a long series of military dictatorships and coup d'etats until the 1985 election of Vinicio Cerezo. In that 29-year period, the military was able to maintain control of the country through a campaign of state terrorism which began with selective assassinations of opposition party leaders, union activists, university professors, students, and anyone else who openly opposed the regime. In the early 1960s, an armed opposition movement began. Twenty years later, the armed opposition had grown to include several different guerrilla organizations throughout Guatemala that came to have significant support and/or membership among indigenous peasants.

The growing guerrilla movement in Guatemala was not unique. It reflected the growth of armed opposition movements throughout Central America. These movements were comprised of citizens grown tired of military repression, political systems serving only elites, and US intervention favoring the rich, the powerful, and the military. Following the Sandinista victory overthrowing the Somoza regime in Nicaragua in 1979, and the nearly successful armed insurrection in El Salvador in 1980, the Guatemalan military shifted from a strategy of selective terror in the cities to one of mass terror in the countryside (this is often referred to as the 'scorched earth campaign'). This does not mean that urban state terror ended, as evidenced by the cooperative police-army venture in the kidnapping, torture, murder and disappearance of children like Rafael and his friends in 1982. Rather, urban terror became a tactic to produce 'evidence' of guerrillas everywhere and justify state terror in the countryside. In the sequester of Rafael and his friends, the 8 surviving children were forced to sign documents confessing that they were guerrilla combatants seeking amnesty from the military. These statements were read and the children were presented to national and international press on the day of their release. No mention was made of the 3 children who never made it out of the clandestine jail. Rafael remembers that on the day of his release as he left the National Police Headquarters with his parents, he saw their mothers held back by police, crying and begging for their children.

This detention, torture and disappearance of children was not an isolated incident or fluke. It was representative of a larger military strategy that between 1980 and 1984, burned 440 villages off the map, displaced 1,500,000 people, sent another 150,000 into refuge and left 100,000 dead or disappeared.<sup>5</sup> These numbers are staggering for any country, but especially for a country with 9 million inhabitants. Yet often times, when people become numbers, their stories are lost.

## II. The testimony

This report is about women as subjects of their own history, negotiating uncertain terrain and developing survival strategies under the weight of unimaginable state violence. In addition to Rafael's testimony, I focus on the oral histories of three women survivors of *La Violencia*<sup>6</sup>: a *ladina*<sup>7</sup> mother from Guatemala City whose son was disappeared; a Tzutuhil widow from a rural village; and, a young Jacalteco woman from a small northern village who joined the guerrilla when she was 15 years old. To survive *La Violencia* is much more than living to tell the story of state terror. Each story is a testimony to the human spirit and the struggle to understand one's past and make sense of the future. All testimony presented in this report was collected in interviews I conducted in the United States, Mexico and Guatemala between 1993 and 1996.

I chose to begin this report with Rafael's testimony because Rafael and his two sisters Clara and Lucia had a mother. She worked in the United States as a maid, sending money home to her shoemaker husband who cared for their children. The separation was a difficult decision made by parents who, despite their extreme poverty, were com-

<sup>5</sup> Jay, A. *Persecution by Proxy: How the Army Uses the Civil Patrols to Repress Indigenous People in Guatemala* (Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights: New York, 1993), p.12.

<sup>6</sup> *La Violencia* - The Violence refers to the massive wave of state terror from 1978 to 1984.

<sup>7</sup> Broadly speaking, *ladinola* is a Guatemalan term used to refer to those of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry -- similar to the Mexican term *mestizo*. *Ladino/a* can also be used by indigenous people who self-identify as *ladino* and do not identify with or practice their indigenous culture. Often times this self-identification is a survival tactic in a racist society divided between 'indian' and 'non-indian'.

mitted to building a better life for their children. Rafael's mother worked in the United States to keep her children in school with the hope that they would one day enter the university. The decision was made that the father should stay with the children because the family lived in an extremely poor barrio of Guatemala City where few children finished primary school and most fell into lives as petty criminals. Rafael and his sisters were well known in the barrio for being the students of the community. Rafael's mother went to the United States to work when he was six years old. The day he left the police station was the first time he had seen her in eight years.

Choosing to begin this report with Rafael's testimony of his detention in a clandestine jail is my attempt to 'divest 'readers' ... of the notion that violence is separate from the larger social and cultural dynamics that shape our lives'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Rafael's personal experience of surviving violence is but one of thousands of individual stories that shed light on the complexities that define the mutually constituted interrelationships between society, culture and the individual within the rubric of state terrorism. These stories are significant and important for recognizing the different ways in which state violence is both experienced and contested by ordinary citizens living under extraordinary circumstances of repression. In recent years, there has been a significant growth in literatures looking at the roles of women in authoritarian<sup>9</sup> and revolutionary states<sup>10</sup> and political movements.<sup>11</sup> These literatures

<sup>8</sup> Nordstrom, C. and Robben, A. (eds.), *Fieldwork Under Fire* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1995), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> See Enloe, C. *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1993) and *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1990); Yuval-Davis, N. (ed.), *Unholy Orders: Women Against Fundamentalism* (Virago: London, 1992); Bunster-Burotto, X., 'Women and torture in Latin America', eds. J. Nash and H. Safa. *Women and Change in Latin America* (Bergin and Garvey: South Hadley, Mass., 1985); Chaney, E., 'The mobilization of women in Allende's Chile', ed. J. Jaquette. *Women in Politics* (John Wiley and Sons: New York, 1974).

<sup>10</sup> See Randall, M., *Gathering Rage: the Failure of Twentieth Century Revolution to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (Monthly Review Press: New York, 1992) and *Sandino's Daughters. Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle* (New Star Books Ltd: Vancouver, 1981); Collinson, H. (ed.), *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* (Zed Books:

range in form from testimonies<sup>12</sup> to analyses of the role of women in human rights movements.<sup>13</sup> The voices of women represented in this report are not those of 'archetypal victims'.<sup>14</sup> Rather, they characterize the very different ways in which each woman negotiates extreme and personal violence in her life and is, in fact, evidence that 'political agency becomes the factored product of multiple subject positions'.<sup>15</sup> Above all, each of the voices in this report give testimony to individual lives, struggles and triumphs. The diversity of personal experience offers an opportunity to witness the uniqueness of each individual experience while, at the same time, recognizing the myriad ways in which state terror wreaks havoc on the very fabric of society, culture, community and family. These are the stories of regular Guatemalans. Ordinary people caught up in times of extraordinary violence.

Rafael, Josefina, Juana and Maria are pseudonyms. Some of them were chosen by the individuals, some were chosen by me as I encoded

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London, 1990); Staunton, I. (ed.), *Mothers of the Revolution: The War Experiences of Thirty Zimbabwean Women* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Brysk, A., *The Politics of Human Rights in Argentina: Protest, Change and Democratization* (Stanford Press: Stanford, 1994); Alvarez, S., *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transitional Politics* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1990); Jaquette, J. (ed.), *the Women's Movement in Latin America: Feminism and the Transition to Democracy* (Unwin Hyman: Boston, 1989).

<sup>12</sup> See Tula, M., *Hear My Testimony* (South End Press: Boston, 1994); Alvarado, E., *Don't Be Afraid Gringo. A Honduran Woman Speaks from the Heart* (Institute for Food and Development Study: San Francisco, 1987); Menchu, R., *I Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (Verso: London, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> See Theidon, K., 'Surviving the siege: Violence and healing in Peru's urban periphery'. Paper presented at American Anthropological Association, Washington DC, Nov. 1995; Guzman Bouvard, M., *Revolutionizing Motherhood - The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (SR Books: Wilmington, 1994); Agosin, M., (ed.), *Surviving Beyond Fear: Women, Children and Human Rights in Latin America* (White Pine Press: Fredonia, 1993); Elstain, J.B. 'The passion of the mothers of the disappeared in Argentina', *New Oxford Review*, (January-February 1992), pp. 4-10; Fisher, J., *Mothers of the Disappeared* (South End Press: Boston, 1989); Schirmer, J. 'Those who die for life cannot be called dead: Women and human rights protest in Latin America', *Feminist Review* vol. 29 (summer 1988), pp. 41-65.

<sup>14</sup> Mohanty, C., Russo, A., and Torres, L., (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1991) p.339.

<sup>15</sup> Feldman, A. *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1991), p. 4.

the cassette tape after the interview. (To protect those I interview, I never use real names). Some of the interviews were clandestine. Some wanted anonymity, others did not but chose anonymity fearing reprisals against their families for speaking about their lives and their personal experience of surviving state terrorism. The stories shared here are but fragments of the hours of interviews. Clearly, any distortions or errors represented in this report are mine alone. Still, as I have struggled with the writing of this report it is my own memory that has made the process entirely too laborious. At times, I have felt so emotionally overwhelmed by individual testimonies that it has taken me months to even listen to the tapes - and even more time to shift roles from listening to writing. I am well aware that it is impossible for me to objectively 'represent' anyone - including myself. Nonetheless, I do find myself weighing each word as I write. This report is my attempt to honor the words of testimony that I am privileged to have and my own words trying to find a context to convey a genocidal gaze so omnipresent that it is felt everywhere by everyone and, despite being profoundly disturbing, still remains ethereal.

### III. The reasons

As I write, I also find myself feeling as though I need to explain and somehow justify the very act of writing itself, explain why this project is more than just one more colonial/neocolonial enterprise of appropriation. As I translated and edited the testimonies of Josefina (a mother with a disappeared son), Juana (a widow and mother of three daughters), and Maria (a woman who joined the guerrilla as an adolescent after finding her cousin's tortured body in the street), I kept thinking of Rafael and his mother. *Revolutionizing Motherhood*, the title of Marguerite Guzman Bouvard's book about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, kept replaying itself as I wrote. Both motherhood and womanhood were revolutionized by Josefina, Juana and Maria in their daily practices as they negotiated and re-negotiated their lives and their relationships - both privately and publicly. As they each sought a personal response to state violence in the public sphere, their lives and roles as women in the private sphere were transformed. It is not that I carry with me some conscious 'assumption of women as an already

constituted coherent group'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, I believe those types of assumptions to be at best lacking in intellectual rigor and, at worst, politically dangerous for the stereotypes they feed and foment. The different ways in which Josefina, Juana and Maria responded to state violence offers insight into the wide range of individual action and highly differentiated political space seized by women despite culturally defined gender roles. Binary representations of nonviolent women versus militarized machismo, the bloody military versus the liberating guerrilla, or the evil ladino versus the innocent indigenous tell nothing of the daily struggles confronted by real people in Guatemala. It seems that, often times, in attempts to encapsulate a culture, anthropologists and other social scientists seek to categorize and compartmentalize, rather than problematize experience. This is particularly dangerous when one seeks to reveal truths about violence and survival for it is a slippery slope to reifying survival, difference, and terror, and thereby eliminating all possibilities for understanding.

So, in writing about women and non-violence in Guatemala, I have found that I have to throw out the very idea and relational construct of women and nonviolence. I have to start with my research materials - transcribed, translated testimonies, and my own memory of the interviews. I have to let these testimonies shape the presentation, rather than edit quotations to fit an ideological representation or trendy theory. I consider John Beverly and Marc Zimmerman's analysis of the testimonial narrative:

Politically, the question in *testimonio* is not so much the difference of the social situations of the direct narrator and the interlocutor as the possibility of their articulation together in a common program or front. ... *Testimonio* is not, in other words, a reenactment of the function of the colonial or neocolonial 'native informant,' nor a form of liberal guilt. ... *Testimonio* in this sense has been extremely important in linking rural and urban contexts of struggle within a given country, and in maintaining and developing the practice of international human rights and solidarity movements... *Testimonio* cannot affirm a self-identity that is separate from a group or class situation marked by marginaliza-

<sup>16</sup> Mohanty, C., Russo, A., and Torres, L., (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1991), p. 337.

tion, oppression, and struggle. ... *Testimonio* ... always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability and complacency of the reader's world must be brought into question.<sup>17</sup>

While Chandra Mohanty has rightly challenged the Western feminist tendency to homogenize Third World women into 'archetypal victims' and an 'already constituted coherent group,' she has also noted that if Third World women can indeed be grouped together in a common context, that context is one of 'political struggle against class, gender and imperialist hierarchies... at this historical juncture'. Moreover, she cautions those who would 'freeze' these women into 'objects who defend themselves'.<sup>18</sup> The individual testimonies of Rafael, Josefina, Juana and Maria are larger than each of their own personal stories and, at the same time, show each woman's individual creation of political space allowing her to be an active subject - far more than an 'archetypal victim' or 'object' relegated to self-defense.

The testimonies are representative of conjunctural moments in Guatemalan history and speak to collective responses to extreme state violence against individuals and their families. The personal stories should also remind both writers and readers that 'we can give voice but never restore lives; we are unable to relieve the reliving of trauma'.<sup>19</sup> Still, I am always surprised by how people I interview want to continue to talk about their experiences long after the tape recorder has been turned off.

A common occurrence in Guatemala has been that people have traveled long distances from isolated rural communities to come to my house in Guatemala City because they want to keep talking. Recently, one woman laughed nervously, then began to cry, before we began a taped interview. I offered that the interview was not a requirement for my friendship and that we did not need to proceed because she was upset. She looked at me in disbelief and said, 'But, Victoria, I want to do the interview. I feel it will help to me release myself from the past.'

Rafael, Josefina, Juana and Maria have each affirmed to me that while it is painful to recount their experiences, it is also a cathartic relief be-

cause the pain is always with them. It is with them in their silence as much as it is with them as they give their testimony. '... [A]cts that restore the voice become not only a denunciation of the pain but almost a diminution of the pain, a partial reversal of the process of torture itself'.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, this recounting of experience is particularly significant for women who are seldom, if ever, asked to reconstruct national history because their experiences are seen as apart from that history, not representative of it.

Silencing voices marginalizes experiences, marginalizes lives. 'When women are made invisible as victims, dissident politics becomes masculine and the role of women is seen as marginal'.<sup>21</sup> In this report, I seek to demonstrate the central and multi-varied roles of women in responding to Guatemalan state terrorism. Indeed, just as clearly as these testimonies reaffirm the masculinization of military repression, they also elucidate concrete examples of 'women taking on new roles in the course of social struggle and the appearance of new bonds of affiliation between men and women'.<sup>22</sup> The testimonies also point to a common catalyst for the politicization of women and their conscious decision to participate in political struggles, their desire to protect their families and/or seek justice for disappeared or dead loved ones. Therefore, I would add to Mohanty's context of political struggle this desire to protect family and loved ones - at least in the case of Guatemala, and probably for most of Latin America, if not most of the world.

#### IV. The anonymous

It is with this lens of women confronting extreme state violence that I chose to begin this report with Jung's words about the best conversations being anonymous. Rafael, Josefina, Juana and Maria are not anonymous people. They are wonderful individuals who I feel privileged to count as my friends. Yet, for their safety and the safety of their families, as individuals they remain anonymous to the reader, anonymous to the public. Still, despite their anonymity, the silence is broken

<sup>17</sup> Beverley, J., and Zimmerman, M. *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* (University of Texas Press: Austin, 1990), p. 177.

<sup>18</sup> See Mohanty, Russo and Torres (note 16).

<sup>19</sup> See Nordstrom and Robben (note 8).

<sup>20</sup> Scarry, E. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1987), p.50.

<sup>21</sup> See Agosin (note 13).

<sup>22</sup> See Beverley and Zimmerman (note 17).

for it is not their identities that need to be known, it is the identity of the terrorist state that is revealed in each testimony. By including Rafael's testimony in this report about women, his mother's silence and anonymity are broken and her actions and life are recognized - not as an object victim of state violence, but as a conscious subject willing to fight to prevent the destruction of her children, of her family. Rafael's testimony also provides context to understand how and why Josefina, Juana and Maria, as well as Rafael's own mother, each chose to respond to state violence as they did.

When Rafael's mother learned her three children had been detained, she borrowed money from friends in the USA and flew back to Guatemala. She desperately searched for her children in every hospital and morgue. Each day, she saw numerous cadavers of young men, young women and children with signs of extreme torture. Each day she searched, she feared she would find her own children dead. When they were finally released from the clandestine jail, she arranged for them to hide with relatives in rural Guatemala until she could borrow the \$10,000 necessary to obtain false documents to get her children out of Guatemala and pay a smuggler to take them across the border into the United States. While staying with relatives, they were not allowed to leave the house nor discuss the trauma of their time in detention for fear someone might overhear the conversation and turn them over to the police. Through tenacity and courage, Rafael's mother was able to move her children to the safety of the United States. Rafael settled into junior high school and his sisters into high school. It was only after arriving to the US that the children were finally able to share with their mother what had happened to them during their two weeks in the clandestine jail. A few months later, Rafael's mother, a healthy woman in her early 40s, died suddenly from a heart attack. Rafael and his sisters believe her heart could not tolerate the pain of learning that every trauma she had seen and imagined as she searched in the morgues had indeed happened to her own children. They had survived, but they were not unharmed. Despite all her efforts to provide a better life for her children, she could not protect them from state violence. It was a burden of pain too great to bear. Rafael's mother is one of many anonymous victims of *La Violencia*.

## 2. Josefina

*'Human Rights are not taught. You practice them all day long from the moment you get up in the morning.'*<sup>1</sup> - Hebe de Bonafini, Leader, *Las Madres de La Plaza de Mayo*

In my personal case, six family members are disappeared. They were captured illegally and then disappeared. My son is disappeared. The other five are relatives of my husband. But many times, the authorities have claimed that there are no disappeared. On the occasions when we have filed complaints and sought information about our disappeared sons and daughters, the authorities have told us that they are working in the United States, are living in Cuba or are guerrillas in the mountains. But, that's a lie. We haven't invented their disappearance.

My son was 22 years old when he was kidnapped here in the capital. It was February 23, 1984. The month of February was a chain of kidnappings, really all of 1984 was like that. Executions committed by the *Judiciales*<sup>2</sup> happened every day. Each day, 5, 8, 10, mutilated cadavers were found on city streets, on highways, in garbage dumps. There were numerous extrajudicial killings.

I went from hospital to hospital and morgue to morgue searching for my son. It was horrible. It was a nightmare to be there in the morgues each day. There were other women, too. Mothers, grandmothers, sisters, wives, aunts. We were all trying to identify our loved ones from amongst the cadavers. There are moments when you feel you are slowly losing your sanity because in your mind you see your children, the way they looked at you. You feel the tenderness. And then, right then when you feel this tenderness you are broken out of your daydream by the nightmare of the corpses paraded in front of you. You remember your loved one. You remember each cadaver you have seen. Sometimes you say to yourself it would be better if they were dead then I wouldn't have to live each day seeing every type of torture inflicted on these people.

<sup>1</sup> Guzman Bouvard, M., *Revolutionizing Motherhood - The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo* (SR Books: Wilmington, 1994), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Many Guatemalans, both indigenous and ladino, use the terms *Judiciales* (Judicial Police) and *Escuadrones* (Death Squads) interchangeably.

This was how it was every day - each woman alone searching for her loved ones. We started to talk to each other and that is how we came to build our organization.<sup>3</sup> We knew that one voice alone would never be heard and we thought that together we could achieve what each of us were individually seeking - the appearance of our loved ones alive. But now so many years have passed and, of course, if one has her feet on the ground, you know it is just not possible because really it is preferable that your loved one is dead and not alive. In what condition could anyone be after 10, 12, or more years of capture.

We've been struggling all these years and we know that we haven't achieved what we sought. Our loved ones are still disappeared, but nonetheless we have accomplished a lot. Forced disappearances and all the violence that happened within the Guatemalan borders is now known worldwide. From 1980-1985, the violence was massive, complete. Terror was everywhere from the city to the countryside. But in the beginning, no one said anything. There was a national silence. This was one of our objectives - to break that silence.

Another objective of ours was to open political space because the popular movement was completely destroyed between 1978 and 1982. Well, we created a little gap so that other organizations could push it further open. We worked with students. We had meetings, demonstrations and marches. It was a very tiny space we were creating. Within our organization, we suffered for this; assassinations of members, kidnappings of students. But instead of making us quiet, these violations made us speak up more. We denounced the assassinations and kidnappings, and continued to demand our loved ones. This constant struggle to speak out helped other Guatemalans know the truth.

Another of our achievements has been the exhumations of clandestine cemeteries. We always knew that our loved ones were somewhere. Even if they are no more than bones today, they are somewhere. We know this. The exhumations prove this. It can no longer be denied. Each exhumation reveals victims of the violence, not soldiers, not guerrillas. Our families, the non-combatant civilian population, peasants, workers. The findings of these exhumations are supported by testimony of witnesses and relatives who survived the massacres. It is their sons, daughters, parents, brothers, sisters, neighbors and cousins that are buried in these clandestine graves.

Not long ago, someone said to me, 'exhuming those graves is in fashion, isn't it?' I just felt that the question and the suggestion were an abuse, but then sometimes the people are abusive without meaning to be. But, for me, for families of those buried in those graves, the exhumations are not anything like a dress, or a pair of shoes, or a meal to eat. Exhumations are painful. It is a painful experience to witness the exhumation. When we go there, we are extremely nervous and anxious. Then, they begin the exhumation and when they start to say, 'Look, there's a piece of clothing, there's a piece of bone.' Even though they can't usually identify all the bones and no one really knows if their loved ones are really in that grave, it makes you wish that your loved one would appear there to bring all this pain to an end. Every morning when I wake up, I think, 'My god, where is he? What happened to him? Will I ever find him? Will there ever be a day when I will really know what happened to him?'

In the exhumations, some are identified, but there are many, many more skeletons that never are. Who are they? Where did they come from? Why are they there? Are they indigenous? Peasants? Or ladinos? Who are they? We witness the religious ceremonies of burial in the villages after the exhumations. And, I think to myself, 'Maybe this is the most we'll be able to do. Maybe this is as far down the road as I will be able to go. But, I don't do this just because I want my son back. We don't do this work just for ourselves. At the very least, after the exhumation, families in these villages can have the satisfaction of a proper religious and legal burial of their loved ones. And, perhaps one day there will be justice - that those who are responsible for these crimes will be judged.

If we are to have democracy with justice, then peace is more than the silencing of guns and signing of documents. We know that we will probably never recover our relatives. That place, the place of my son, will be empty all my life. I am going to die, but my son had a child and there are lots of brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews who will all remember his absence and will also remember that there was no justice. Part of the problem is the political environment. Judges are often afraid to even be in the area where violent acts were committed. They are human beings, too. They feel fear. After all, how many judges have been assassinated? Disappeared? I'll tell you, many. They have every right to be afraid. The judges are often afraid at the beginning of an exhumation. But as the days pass and everyone gets to know each other

<sup>3</sup> Josefina is referring to FAMDEGUA - Families of the Disappeared of Guatemala.

a little better and works together, everyone feels stronger and less afraid.

We are not saying that everyone should be judged. People acted differently during *La Violencia*. It was a different time. The truth is that I don't think it would be possible to judge everyone responsible at every level. In the beginning, it was often said that everyone responsible had to be judged from the top down to the bottom. But we don't want an entire platoon of the army to be ordered to present itself in front of a firing squad and have all the soldiers killed because they participated in a massacre. Often times, soldiers were forced to kill their own relatives. People were forced to do horrible things. They did them out of fear, out of terror. So, I don't think they are the ones who should be judged. It is true that they share the guilt for what happened, but it is the intellectual authors we are after. We want the people who planned and ordered the massacres to be judged.

Today we are struggling for a different society, a non-violent culture that is truly open where everyone has the right to work and organize, a society with equality. How is it possible that Congressional candidates are perpetrators of violence? Of massacres? They are assassins.<sup>4</sup> How is it possible for them to become members of Congress and legislate our lives? Especially those who want amnesty laws - amnesty for themselves. It is an injustice, a travesty. How dare they? I am not just thinking of my son, my pain is also for the other thousands of families of the disappeared. Until there is justice, there can be no peace.

I think the international community has a very important role to play in this process. We are really very dependent on the European Community and the US government, just like we are dependent on our friends in all these countries. So, I think that all the money that is being given to Guatemala today should be given conditionally, that there must be real peace and that everyone has the right to know what this money is being used for. There is so much work to be done. That is why we work like ants. Really, our work is the work of ants. It is slow, but we believe it is strong.

<sup>4</sup> Josefina is referring to the candidacy and subsequent election of General Rios Montt and other members of his party to Guatemalan Congress in 1994.

### 3. Juana

*'Violence comes unbidden and unexplained into the heart of the civilian population, the center of the war's destructiveness.'*<sup>1</sup>

My husband wasn't the first military commissioner.<sup>2</sup> There was another before him and he did much harm to the village. Everyone in the village feared him because the harm was great. So they held a special meeting where the village nominated and elected my husband as military commissioner in 1983.

Before my husband was military commissioner, there were many robberies and killings - and the military commissioner led them. After so much pain and so much fear, the villagers initiated proceedings to put these men in jail for all the harm they brought to us. My husband was military commissioner at this time and these men went to jail.

When my husband was military commissioner, there was no more harm; no more kidnappings, no more robberies, no more disappearances, no more rapes. The village was calm, tranquil. But, because my husband did not want to hurt the people, the men who supported the former military commissioner and the other men in jail began to threaten my husband. They complained that my husband was a bad man because he wouldn't obey the orders from the military base.

I remember one night when men came from the military base and they woke us up. It was the middle of the night. Everyone in the village was asleep. My husband got up and talked with the men. He asked them what they wanted. They said they wanted a man from the village. They wanted to take him out of his home. They wanted to take this man away with them into the night. My husband told them, 'No.' He

<sup>1</sup> Nordstrom, C., and Martin, J., *The Paths of Domination, Resistance and Terror* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1993), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> *Comisionado Militar* (Military Commissioner) is the army-appointed civilian commander of the Civil Patrols who implements army orders and is accountable to the army for all Civil Patrol activities. The Civil Patrol is an army mandated and controlled, compulsory paramilitary organization comprised of all men in rural villages. They are responsible for carrying out all army orders. For overview and history of Civil Patrols, see Jay, Alice, *Persecution by Proxy: The Civil Patrols in Guatemala* (New York: The Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Center for Human Rights, 1993). For a detailed personal encounter, see Montejo, V., *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1987).



said it was not permitted to wake people up in the middle of the night and take them away. My husband told them this because he did not want to be responsible for this man's life. My husband told them that it was better to wait until morning and make an appointment requesting that the man present himself to the military authorities.

So, the next morning my husband sent word to the man that he needed to present himself at the office of the military commissioner - that was my husband's office. The man presented himself, but my husband did not hand him over to the army inside the office. He did it outside in front of many villagers. The man was turned over to the army healthy, well and with no injuries. He had to turn him over because the army had documents. The army took him away. I don't know what happened to that man, what the army did to him.

This is when problems began. The former military commissioner and the people who supported him really began to speak badly of my husband. It was like this for quite a while. 'Sebastian only has a few days left.' 'Soon, they will come for Sebastian.' That was my husband's name, Sebastian. These men would get drunk and threaten my husband like this. In the end, these bad men got their wish.

It was a Tuesday. We had only been in bed for a short while when they broke open our door - I don't know if they did it by kicking with their feet or beating it down with their weapons. When they broke open the door, I went and asked them what they wanted. They told me they wanted my husband. My husband was in bed. I told them I would call him. But then I turned around and went back to these men to ask them why they wanted my husband. They answered that it was an army order and they wanted to talk to him. I knew something bad was going to happen. I begged them not to hurt him. I told them that my husband was an honorable man. That he wasn't rich, but that he took care of us.

The third time they demanded my husband, I went to him and advised him that he had to get up and present himself. I told him this despite feeling that they were going to take him away and hurt him.

He got up. He got dressed and as he left the place where we slept, he said to one of the men, 'Good evening Lt. Ruano.' This was his way of letting us know who was taking him away. The man replied, 'Good evening.' The other men grabbed my husband's arms and they took him away. His last words were, 'Good-bye, Mama.' That's when my mother-in-law got up, and my brother-in-law, too. The three of us started to run after them, but there were two armed men who stopped

us. They said, 'Stay here or we'll kill you.' So, we stopped, but then we went the other direction up the street and around the corner. A pick-up passed us making a lot of noise. It passed by very quickly, but we saw they had him inside. We were screaming.

For all the screaming, shouting and noise, the entire village woke up. Someone rang the church bell. The entire village gathered. 'What was the motive? Why did they take Sebastian away?' Everyone asked these questions into the middle of the night. Then, at about 6 in the morning when the men began to go to the fields to work, they found two cadavers: my husband and his uncle. They both had terrible marks from torture. They had sequestered his uncle on Tuesday afternoon in Panajachel, then they came for my husband late that same night. From then on, things just got worse in the village.

My husband was poor, but he was honorable. He didn't want to harm anyone. He would say, 'I can't be responsible. I can't turn over people in the middle of the night. Who is going to put food on the table for the families if the men are gone?'

My husband was military commissioner for two years. When he was killed, I was 25 years old. Our daughters were 7, 5 and 3 years old. I struggled for justice. I went to the capital to denounce his murder. I went to the local police and judge. Together with support from other villagers, the men who took my husband away were put in jail - but not for long. When they first got out of jail, they were humiliated. In the village, everyone ignored them. We all acted like they didn't exist. All the villagers did this.

The villagers have treated us well. They remember my husband with fondness. They appreciated him. They have tried to console us. They help us out. They bring me a bit of corn, a bit of beans. Like right now, she's bringing me some masa.<sup>3</sup> To support my daughters, I wash clothes in people's houses, sometimes at the lake. I iron clothes. I make tortillas. When I work in someone's house, I bring the lunch they give me home to my daughters so they will eat better. I am lucky if I can get work three days out of the week. When I do, I work from six in the

<sup>3</sup> *Masa* is a dough of ground corn and water used to make tortillas. During our interview, a woman from the village brought Juana enough *masa* for one meal's worth of tortillas for the family. Without this kind of collaboration from other villagers, Juana and her children would not have enough food to eat.

morning until six at night. I get paid 10 quetzales a day.<sup>4</sup> It's hard to find work here.

When the men first killed my husband, I wanted justice. Then, I wanted those men judged and sent to prison for the rest of their lives so they wouldn't be able to kill more people like that, so the village could live in peace. When they killed my husband, it was a time of great violence and many people were harmed.

Now, so many years later, I look at my daughters and how difficult their lives are. Even the wood we need for the stove costs so much. It is the fault of these men. What guilt do my daughters have? Why should they suffer like this? Today my daughters are 18, 16 and 14 years old. They all work. Not one of them was able to finish primary school. Now they will be poor all their lives. They have to work. If they don't work, there isn't enough to eat. If we stay home sitting around, we won't eat. We all have to work to eat.

So, I tell you, today justice for my husband's death would be that those men who killed him have to pay money so our daughters don't suffer like this. Justice for me today would be to see my daughters in school and those men paying for it.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of the interview, the exchange rate was 6.8 quetzales to the dollar. Ten quetzales = \$1.47.

#### 4. Maria

*'The first time I saw the guerrilla, what I saw was that they were just like us. There were Kanjobales, Kakchiqueles, Mames and others. There were women.'* -Survivor of Guatemalan Army massacre in Cuarto Pueblo, 1991.

The army arrived and kidnapped three teenage boys. They tortured them and they killed one of them right in the village. He resisted them and tried to get away. They cut out chunks of flesh and stabbed him many times. Then they left his mutilated body on the road near his house. The army took the other two boys with them - they were brothers, those two. No one in the village had ever seen anything like this. We had never lived through anything like this before. We were all very fearful that the army would come back.

The next day in the afternoon, 5 heavily armed soldiers returned to the village with these two boys. We almost didn't recognize them. Their faces were almost completely covered. They had on hats and were shoeless. The soldiers pulled them along quickly. I noticed that they pulled them because the boys could hardly walk. It looked like the soles of their feet had been peeled and cut up so they couldn't run. So, they walked through the entire village with these soldiers pulling and pushing them. They walked up and down every street. These two boys were unable to tolerate the torture of the army, so they started giving names of everyone they knew and they pointed out their houses.

The first house they entered was Lauriano's. He knew that what awaited him was a terrible and painful death. So, he began to fight with them. The soldiers were kicking him when he got a gun away from one of them. Lauriano was a guerrilla combatant. He knew how to fight. This didn't save his life. It made his death less painful. When he began to fire the gun, the soldiers machine-gunned him down. He died right then and there. It would have been worse if they had taken him away. His body was riddled with bullets. They left him there on the patio. The soldiers left the village with the two boys. They took them to the outskirts of the village. They killed them. The soldiers cut off their heads and their arms and their legs. They tossed their body parts all over the place. They didn't even leave a whole body for us to mourn and bury.

These kidnappings and killings were the first blows we received in the village. We fled the village. We lived in Mexico for two months. But we missed our house and our land. So, we returned. The village was very organized. There was a community alarm to warn of the approach of the army so that everyone could flee.

Everything seems normal in the village, tranquil. But then one morning, about 15 days later, we awoke to find the army surrounding the village. They captured 2 men. One of them was my cousin. They took them outside the village up into the mountain. They tortured them. They cut off their fingers, they pulled out their nails, they burned their faces with cigarettes. They cut off their hands, their ears. They cut out chunks of their cheeks and pulled out their eyes. They left the bodies in pieces. When we found them, we took the pieces back to the cemetery and buried them. Once again, the fear began to take over. The fear that the army would return with names of more people and take more away. We didn't have any weapons to protect ourselves. So everyone stayed inside their house.

I was very frightened. I was very afraid of the army. I began to think, 'If I am suffering here from fear and if I am going to fall into the hands of the army no matter what, and there we're all going to die. Then, what am I doing sitting here without a weapon? I would rather go once and for all with the guerrilla. If I am going to die, I want to die for something good. I want a weapon and if I die I will die killing a soldier.' That is when I accepted my own death. I decided to find the guerrilla in the mountains and join them. And that's what I did. I was 15 years old.

I found them in the mountain. I found the commander and I told him that if they would accept me I wanted to join their forces. I told him I wanted to fight the army. I told him I had seen the horrible things they did to people in my village, to unarmed people. I told him I wanted to go into combat. I told him it wasn't fair to die defenseless. That it was better to be armed and prepared and die in combat. They accepted me. That same afternoon, I joined the forces of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) and they gave me a weapon. I began my training.

Everything went along fine. But the truth is that, after about 8 days, I was finding it all pretty difficult. In my house, I had hardly ever worked. My sisters and I were the smallest, so we had always been pampered. We were peasants, but we always had enough to eat because my father had a lot of land. In my house, there was always a lot of food

at mealtimes and we had enough water to bathe everyday. But in the EGP, a lot of times there wasn't any water for bathing. The truth is this was my biggest desperation, that I couldn't bathe. Sometimes we didn't even have water to drink. I even told them that I felt desperate for water - for water to drink and water to bathe in.

Two or three days had passed and there was no water for bathing, there wasn't even water to drink. I felt truly desperate. I wanted to bathe. At first it seems extremely difficult - you're very hungry, you haven't gotten enough sleep, you walk all night long in the darkness, you trip, you fall, you get wet, and you just keep going, going, going. You see we had to walk at night so that the army could not easily locate us. In the beginning, I really regretted my decision. But, I just kept thinking, 'I'll see if I can make it through today and maybe I will leave tomorrow.'

And, so this is how it was and the days began to pass. I started to get used to not bathing everyday. Every 2 or 3 days, we would organize into squads of 10 combatants to bathe. We would go to the water in squads of 2. One squad would bathe while the other stood guard. If the army arrived, the squad standing guard would engage in combat while those bathing got dressed and withdrew. Some days we had no food, other days we had no water, some days we had neither. But some days, we had both.

I had been in the EGP for about one month when I realized we were walking through mountains very close to my village. I thought it would be very easy to walk back there alone. As I walked I thought how one month earlier, I would have run back to my house. But, the day I walked near my village in the EGP platoon, I felt proud of what I had endured and the strength I had found in myself. I thought to myself, 'Tomorrow there might not be food, there might not be water,' and I laughed because I realized I hadn't bathed for two days. I chose not to go home. After a month, I liked being a combatant.

It was after this first month that I began to receive military training. The training was very difficult. We had to crawl through the ground on our stomachs. In the mountain there were lots of stickers and rocks and mud. We had to crawl through like any other soldier in military training. We had to crawl across the ground, walk across ropes and jump very high.

For me this was all a great challenge. Because of my inheritance of being so *chaparrita*,<sup>1</sup> there were times when things were simply out of my reach. This always put me behind the men because they are always taller than I, so it was easy for them. But the best thing is that it was in this training that I discovered that I really loved being a combatant. I loved having a weapon at my disposition and I learned how to use it well. I couldn't jump as high as the men, but I could shoot as well or better than most of them.

So it was in this month of training that the commanders asked me what I wanted to do when I was finished, if I wanted to be a combatant or an organizer. There was also a collective where uniforms were made for the combatants. They asked me if I would like to work there in the sewing workshop. They told me there was also a workshop where explosives were assembled. They asked me what I preferred to do. I told them straight out, 'I would like to be a combatant.'

Our first action was a of a jeep of judiciales - these are different from the army and the police. They are the squadrons, the ones that disappear and kill people. Anyway, these judiciales always had very good weapons. We had been informed that they were transporting weapons. So, we ambushed them with a Klaymer bomb that we had actually made ourselves. This was my first experience. So, when the car passed by, I didn't know what would really happen. I had never been so close to the military. The Judiciales passed by and the bomb exploded. Actually, right after the explosion, I stood there frozen, half-stupid. With a big explosion like that, one feels somewhat absurd immediately afterwards.

We took their arms away and quickly withdrew from the area because almost immediately after the explosion, a helicopter arrived. It was a very bare area. There was almost no vegetation. This was my first close call. We had been running as fast as we could for about 10 minutes when I felt that I just couldn't go on any longer. I felt dizzy. I felt like I was about to suffocate. I just couldn't run anymore. But then, I just calmed myself. I took some deep breaths. I told myself that my body was functioning normally and I continued to run. We ran and ran. We all escaped the army. I learned a lot, especially about weapons. I learned how to handle them all. This was my job in the guerrilla for 1 year.

<sup>1</sup> Chaparrita is a colloquial expression meaning short, petite or tiny. Maria's height is 4 feet, 8 inches.

My next job was with the *National Direction*<sup>2</sup> which is always located in very secure areas, in places that it would be very difficult for the army to find. It was not the grand physical sacrifice that I was used to, but there were many new rules to learn. The security was very tight. The arms were very good, very light weight. But, we were very heavily armed. Sometimes, I almost couldn't tolerate it because I am so small and I was carrying a mountain of weaponry. I carried an M-16 with 300 rounds of fire, a 380 with 50 rounds of fire, two grenades and a dagger. And all this was around my waist. I was really full of weapons. But, I loved it. I was enchanted.

I started to think that what I really wanted to do was to directly engage in combat with the army. I wanted to see if I was afraid of the army. I wanted to see how brave I was. I asked for authorization. In 1986, I joined the military unit. I was very happy because I was going to go into combat with the army.

We attacked the army base in San Lucas on December 31. We were 80 combatants. They were 800 to 1000 soldiers. So, we were few in comparison to them. We had been spying on them for days. Every afternoon at one, they went down to the river to bathe. So, we went down to the river and we set up an ambush on the shore of the river. Because it was the 31st of December, the soldiers started to play soccer at 10 in the morning and they played until 1 in the afternoon. So, we knew that when they finished playing, they would come down to the river to bathe. But, at 2 in the afternoon, they finished playing and then returned to the barracks. We had been there since 6 in the morning. We hadn't eaten and we were thirsty. We couldn't move from our positions because they might see us. We had used all kinds of plants and weeds for camouflage and they tickled and itched. We were all feeling sad because they weren't coming out. Then, at 4 in the afternoon, we can hear everyone shouting inside the base and the first platoon comes out and heads straight down to the river.

The *companeros* positioned closest to me were 4 women and some other *companeros* from the capital - these are people who suffer a lot and take a long time learning to survive in the mountain. I still didn't have much experience in this type of situation either. I saw that really we were not ready to directly combat the army when the soldiers were right in front of us. I had never before seen a *Kaibil*.<sup>3</sup> He was 4 meters

<sup>2</sup> *National Direction*, (Dirección Nacional), is the High Command of the EGP.

<sup>3</sup> *Kaibiles* are elite fighting forces of the Guatemalan army.

in front of me. He was armed and I was armed. I thought, 'I am going to die here.' And I began to tremble from fear. There was another *companero* who was supposed to fire first. And, I thought, 'This Kaibil is going to be on top of me before he fires.' And the Kaibil was actively looking all around himself, checking everything out. He didn't see anything. We were all around and he was looking, but saw nothing. When he was only 3 meters in front of me, the *companero* began to fire and I also began to fire. The attack had begun. He was the first soldier we wasted.

Then, the entire army force came out. While the army was positioning itself, we were gathering the weapons from all the soldiers we had killed. Then, the soldiers began to fire heavy weapons. So, we withdrew to protect ourselves. We were 3, 1 man and 2 women. We were ordered to advance, fire and take the weapons away from the fallen soldiers. At first, I didn't want to do this. There were bullets flying everywhere and I knew that if I stood up or moved forward on the ground, any hidden soldier would fire on me. Then, I thought, 'Well if I am going to die anyway,' and I said to the other woman, 'Let's go. Advance with me so I'm not alone.' Then the man said, 'Let's go. The 3 of us go together. If we die, we die together.' So, we moved forward and we took the machine gun away from the dead soldier. But it was very difficult to get his munitions because he had his belt very tightly fastened. We kept ours tightly fastened, too. You have to keep it tight to hold all the weight. But, he even had little lassos on his belt. To make it worse, he was full of machine gun fire and it was all very hard to remove. Everything was full of bullet fragments. There were 3 dead soldiers there, but we were only able to remove weapons from 1 because another army platoon came upon us and our unit was almost wiped out. We had 4 injured and 1 dead. On top of that, a lot of our weapons weren't working.

By this time, I had fired 250 rounds of munitions from my M-16. I had 400 rounds altogether. I was afraid and I was trembling, but when I started to fire, I forgot that I could die. I forgot about everything. I just kept fighting. All I thought about was how to continue firing until I heard the order to withdraw. We continued to fire. Some of us carried the injured, while others protected us.

There were dead guerrilla combatants, too. We were able to remove them from the site. We buried them. We never left injured and dead combatants behind. The army did this. They would just leave their dead soldiers wherever they fell. The only thing the army did was re-

move the weapons. We had more respect for our *companeros*. We removed them from the battle site. If the dead combatant had a better uniform than one of us, then we switched uniforms. We took the best for the living because all combatants always needed uniforms. It was really a desperate situation. Can you imagine removing your dead friend's clothes before the burial? In the beginning, one really doesn't know how to adjust to this kind of life, plus it was very sad, it gave me great sadness to see the dead *companeros*, friends I had been living with for quite some time. It was very sad.

But, one gets stronger. You get used to seeing dead and injured all the time. It begins to feel normal. It is normal. You see a dead *companera* and you say, 'Well, she was lucky. She is no longer suffering. Now, she's resting.' And each one of us knew that the next day it could be any one of us. We were all conscious that death could strike us at any moment.

So, these were my experiences in combat. This is how it was for me. As a woman combatant, in the beginning I really felt that I was out of place. But, I began to believe that women have every capacity that men have. Even more, I put forth a great deal of effort to be a good combatant and I succeeded in this. The only thing I really wanted was to not fall behind the men. I wanted to always be at their side, at the same level as them, to demonstrate that a woman could be just as good a combatant as a man.

In my village, men would always say, 'I am the man and I can do everything. You can't do anything. The only thing you can do is have children.' So, in the mountains, everything is different because everyone knows that everyone is capable of doing whatever a man does. I think that this is really psychological work for the men - that they have to look at the *companeras* as their equals, that they can't discriminate against them. This is one of the first things we learn - that everyone has equal value, men and women, indigenous and ladino, that no one is below anyone else. I want my daughter to understand this, that she is on an equal plane with men.

Of course, all of this was difficult when I came to Mexico to live with my parents. My opinions were now different from theirs. I would say, 'Women's freedom is the same as men's.' And my mother would say, 'No, my daughter. You have to let the man run the home. He is the one to give orders. He is the boss of the family.' There was an entire year of these conversations. It was very hard, especially with my brother. He would say, 'I am the boss of the house and my woman will

do whatever I tell her. I'll make her do it.' And I would tell them that he had to respect her as his partner, that he couldn't hit her. This was all very trying, but we are a very united family and we stick together. So, in the end, this is all part of our own personal liberation. I think we continue to liberate ourselves with these discussions even when they are difficult. We learn from one another.

## 5. Reflections

Rafael's mother, Josefina, Juana and Maria are the players in the mobilization of civil society. They are the individuals of whom we speak when we talk of resistance and popular mobilization. When told, their testimonies make up the collective consciousness of an activated civil society challenging and reshaping the state. When kept secret, these testimonies are the dark side of the collective unconscious of a state of terror. They are society's 'family secret' and, as long as they go unnamed, everyone shares the guilt of silence. 'Rumor begins at this border of silence around the kernel of the absent event, the disappeared body, the silenced name' and it is within this schema of impunity that 'the political victim, whether deceased or alive, is always partially disappeared'.<sup>1</sup>

Impunity is a law of exception,<sup>2</sup> which permits and foments actions of the state against its citizens. It is anti-democratic in that it inverts the relationship of a state, which represents and responds to the needs of the people to a people who are submitted to the whims of the state. Impunity is an exemption from punishment which 'negates the values of truth and justice and leads to the occurrence of further [human rights] violations'.<sup>3</sup>

In October of 1982, *Amnesty International* reported that the Guatemalan government had destroyed entire villages, tortured and mutilated local people and carried out mass executions in at least 112 separate incidents between March and July. 'On 5 April 1982, for example, troops entered a village in Quiche, forced all inhabitants into the

<sup>1</sup> Feldman, A., *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1991), pp. 234-8.

<sup>2</sup> Federación Latinoamericana de Asociaciones de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos (FEDEFAM), *Encuentro Regional Contra La Impunidad* (FEDEFAM: Santiago, Chile, 1987), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, *Guatemala: Massive Extrajudicial Executions in Rural Areas Under the Government of General Efraim Rios Montt* (Amnesty International: London, 1982), p. 11.

courthouse, raped the women and beheaded the men, and then battered the children to death against rocks in a nearby river'.<sup>4</sup>

In the countryside, where the majority indigenous population live, the military established numerous military bases and airstrips. From these bases, the military planned and conducted raids on indigenous villages. Those who survived the raids were driven into the mountains or forcibly 'relocated' to 'strategic hamlets' where they were required to participate in the army-controlled civil patrols - which frequently involved participating in the destruction of other villages and the murder of neighbors and other indigenous people.<sup>5</sup>

Those responsible for strategizing and carrying out these crimes with impunity act extralegally, and those who act extralegally soon act illegally. 'The torturers become smugglers, blackmailers and extortionists and no one can stop them'.<sup>6</sup> In Guatemala, they even become members of Congress. As Josefina pointed out, amnesty is an 'injustice, a travesty'.

Indeed, she was speaking of the 1994 election of former General Efraín Ríos Montt who, after declaring himself president in 1982 on the heels of a coup d'état, directed the *scorched earth campaign* and institutionalized the national security state when he declared a state of siege on July 1, 1982.<sup>7</sup> If massacres, kidnapping, torture, assassinations and disappearances have a chilling effect on the court system, the state of siege declared by Ríos Montt provided an affirmation of impunity for the perpetrators of these criminal acts, a guarantee of continued terror for the rest of society and a state fomented paralysis of the court system. Within this national security state, any threat to the military is

perceived as a threat to the state and any threat to the state is perceived as a threat to the common good of society. In this model, rights do not inhere in the individual, and democratic participation in government is both unnecessary and antithetical to the common good. The military becomes the enforcer of this 'common good'.<sup>8</sup>

## I. Justice

National security ideology thus casts justice and social peace as counterplots. Justice is viewed as an individual affair whereas social peace (or common good) is perceived as a collective condition of obedience to the state having priority over justice. Order, social peace and common good - as defined by the national security state - require that exigency of justice be sacrificed. Even as the national security state begins to fail, lose control, or even self-destruct, this ideology permeates transitions from military rule. Here, reconciliation (used interchangeably with social peace or common good) is perceived to have higher moral or political standing than justice (which would involve recognition and/or punishment of perpetrators of human rights violations).<sup>9</sup>

In transitions from military rule, this national security ideology is best expressed in arguments for societal reconciliation based on amnesty for the military and their agents who systematically violated human rights under military rule. This is not reconciliation based on truth. Rather, it is based on historic oblivion. In interviews with high-ranking Guatemalan military officials, I have been told that 'reconciliation [read social peace or common good] requires sacrifice,' and that the military had 'made mistakes' and committed 'abuses,' but 'we need equitable justice' [read prosecution of the guerrilla]. This topic of conversation inevitably concluded: 'We won the war.' One army official added, 'Look, whoever is the most organized wins the political space and we have the most organization.' Those within the Guatemalan military who are willing to recognize that there were 'abuses' do so by drawing a definitive distinction between the past and the present

<sup>4</sup> Diskin, M., (ed.), *Trouble in Our Backyard: Central America and the United States in the 1980s* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1983), p.186.

<sup>5</sup> See Guatemalan Church in Exile (IGE), *Guatemala: Security, Development and Democracy* (IGE: Location Not Given, 1989); Manz, B., *Refugees of a Hidden War - The Aftermath of Counterinsurgency in Guatemala* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1988); Montejo, V. *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* (Curbstone Press: Willimantic, 1987); Padilla, L., (ed.), *Guatemala: Polos de Desarrollo* volumes I and II (Editorial Press: Mexico City, 1988 and 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Weschler, L., *A Miracle, A Universe - Settling Accounts with Torturers* (Pantheon Books: New York, 1990), p. 66.

<sup>7</sup> Fried, J., (ed.), *Guatemala in Rebellion* (Grove Press: New York, 1983), pp. 331-2.

<sup>8</sup> Crahan, M., (ed.), *Human Rights and Basic Needs in the Americas* (Georgetown University Press: Washington DC, 1982), p.118.

<sup>9</sup> See FEDEFAM (note 2).

within the context of the Cold War. Viewing the past in this way provides a justification for previous 'abuses' while diminishing their significance. It also explains why the army should now be trusted not to repeat those 'abuses' - i.e., human rights violations are no longer necessary because the Cold War has ended and, therefore, amnesty should be granted in recognition of the historical necessities imposed upon the military by the Cold War.

Yet experiences in transitions from military rule around the world indicate that amnesty brings neither reconciliation, nor social peace, not even superficially. Further, amnesty provisions reaffirm the historical silences imposed through repression by previous regimes because amnesty is, in effect, an official negation of government/military responsibility, as well as a negation of the very violations perpetrated. Amnesty creates an 'official story' which denies individual victims of violence, as well as their families and society in general, a forum for truth. 'Preventing the emergence of truth and subsequent accountability before the law should not be acceptable, whether effected by those responsible for the violations or by successor governments'.<sup>10</sup>

## II. Truth

It is impossible to interrogate the amnesty debate without addressing both the theory and practice of truth in societies in a transition from military rule. Only by understanding the importance of truth is it possible to understand why amnesty is not acceptable. Amnesty places truth outside the structure of the transition from military rule and outside the structure of the foundation being laid for the new civilian government. Truth is important for historical reasons, in order to inform present and future generations so that the violence of the past cannot be repeated - as those who survived the Holocaust have attempted to teach the rest of the world. Truth also provides immediate and practical benefits for the victims and their families because it returns social dignity to victims and liberates those who have been outcast by the

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International, *Guatemala: Massive Extrajudicial Executions in Rural Areas Under the Government of General Efraim Rios Montt* (Amnesty International: London, 1982), p. 12.

stigma of being identified by the military or its agents as 'guilty' or 'subversive' and allows for their reintegration into society. 'Truth overcomes fear ... just truth alone provides half the justice necessary to return to peace'.<sup>11</sup>

For mothers, fathers and other family members who have lived the isolation, fear and worry as they searched for disappeared loved ones or secretly went to the mass graves in their army-controlled villages to leave flowers for those who were massacred, the simple truth is powerful. In this way, truth becomes an experience of collective consciousness that breaks isolation. Truth also presents the possibility of the victims having an opportunity to seek justice and also to pardon the perpetrators. Amnesty provides for neither justice, nor meaningful reconciliation, because the state cannot truly pardon those responsible for human rights violations; only the victims and their families can do this, and they can only do this with the security that the whole of society is empowered with the truth. Meaningful reconciliation is based on historic truth, not oblivion.

## III. Transition

Regardless of how outside observers may choose to define human rights, impunity, truth and popular mobilization in their attempts to understand and develop a blueprint for transitions from military rule, it is the key actors within each country who ultimately determine the outcome. The testimonies of Rafael, Josefina, Juana and Maria demonstrate unequivocally that neither their understanding of their roles in both private and public spheres, nor their definitions of the justice they seek, are static. Indeed, while Josefina seeks prosecution of the intellectual authors of *La Violencia*, Juana has come to view the kidnapping, torture and assassination of her husband as a crime against her daughters' futures. Maria redefined her womanhood in the guerrilla and today seeks personal liberation for herself, her family and her daughter.

The private relationships between Rafael and his mother, Josefina and her son, Juana and her husband, and Maria and her cousin were redefined by the cataclysmic incursion of state terrorism in the private sphere; the detention and torture of children, the disappearance of a

<sup>11</sup> See FEDEFAM (note 2), p. 39.



son, the torture and murder of a husband, the disappearance of a cousin and the reappearance of his lifeless tortured body. These acts of violence perpetrated by agents of the state irrevocably marked and forever transformed the intimate relationships of these women with their families. Moreover, these transformations grew into the redefinition of the very articulation of these women's individual identities and personal relationships with themselves and others in both the private and public sphere. Perhaps one of the ironies of *La Violencia* is the multi-varied forms of individual and collective resistance which were stimulated by the very state terrorism designed to silence all forms of protest.

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