The Silencing of Maya Women from Mamá Maquin to Rigoberta Menchú

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Introduction


TERROR IS A PLACE THAT OCCUPIES MEMORY LONG AFTER THE BATTLE HAS CLOSED. IT IS A FILTER, THE LEAD THROUGH WHICH WE UNDERSTAND THE PAST, INTERPRET THE PRESENT, AND UPON WHICH WE BASE OUR HOPES FOR THE FUTURE. TO UNDERSTAND GUATEMALA'S CURRENT TRANSITION FROM AN AUTOCRATIC RUL and its efforts to CONSTRUCT A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY BASED ON THE RULE OF LAW, WE MUST FIRST TRY TO COMPREHEND HOW THE MAJORITY RURAL MAYA EXPERIENCED STATE STRUCTURES OF TERROR AND HOW THEY INTERNALIZED THESE STRUCTURES AS PART OF THEIR INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES. VIOLENCE WAS NOT MERELY AN EFFECT OF STATE TERROR; IT WAS ONE OF MANY INSTRUMENTS THE STATE USED TO ASSERT ITS DOMINATION. IN THE EARLY 1980S, VIOLENCE AGAINST INDIVIDUALS AND...
As Paul Ricœur (1967) wisely noted, "to project our past, our future, our human miles around ourselves is precisely to situate ourselves." As awareness of the contemporary situated subjectivity of the majority rural Maya allows us to seek a broader understanding of the experience of surviving a seemingly endless chain of violent events; within this experience, we encounter the nuanced complexity and meaning of terror.

Though the reification of violence and terror is an ever-present slippery slope in analytic attempts to seek understanding (Taussig, 1987), schematic descriptions of the phenomenology of terror indicate that solid analysis and contestation can be found in the worst of survivors. Marguerite Feitlowitz (1998: 77–83) suggests that terror presents a cascade of "unthinkable options" in a world where torture and death are "catastrophes for thought," so people try "to stop thinking." Her research on torture in Argentina from that "language itself became a prison" (ibid.: 107).

The narratives of survivor testimony presented here reaffirm the external and internal prisons in which massacre survivors have lived. For survivors giving testimony, the very act of verbalizing the experience and meaning of survival is a contestation and reshaping of the world. Recounting their experiences is painful, but it is also a cathartic relief since the pain is always with them. It is with them both in their silence and when giving testimony: "acts that restore the voice become not only a denunciation of the pain, but almost a dissolution of the pain, a partial reversal of the process of torture itself" (Scarry, 1985: 50). Moreover, this recounting of experience is particularly significant for rural Maya (and especially for Maya women), who are seldom, if ever, asked to reconstruct national history because they are seen as apart from history, not representative agents of it (Sanford, 1997: 12–13).

Rigoberta Menchú and the Reshaping of Guatemalan History

In "The Small Voice of History," Ramita Guha (1996: 11) asks, "but suppose there were a historiography that regarded ‘what women were saying’ as integral to its project, what kind of history would it write?" Guha offers that a rewriting attentive to women’s voices will (1) "challenge the univocality of state discourses" and (2) "put the question of agency and instrumentality back in the narrative." This is exactly what happened with the 1983 publication of Rigoberta Menchú’s autobiography, Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia (published in English in 1984 as I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala). By asserting the political consciousness, self-expression, and political action of Maya women, Menchú challenged official histories of Guatemala and romantic representations of Maya women. Each, in distinct ways, negated the dynamic and varied political responses of Maya women to Guatemalan state violence. Recorded and written in Paris by anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos Debray, I, Rigoberta chronicles the life at Rigoberta’s family and serves as a vehicle for the outsider (both non-Maya Guatemalan and the international community) to understand the struggles of the Maya in Guatemala to defend their lands, communities, and culture at the face of ever-increasing state violence. Her book and multiple speaking engagements in Europe and the United States transformed Rigoberta’s standing in the world community as Maya, female, and campesina. Rigoberta came to represent the antithesis of stereotypes of Maya women as silent, traditional, static, lacking politics, and without agency. Indeed, I, Rigoberta, and later Rigoberta herself, demanded recognition of Maya women as more than pawns in political processes designed and led by others. Rigoberta obliged the world to recognize Maya women as agents of their own history, whose participation in political movements shaped those movements regardless of their initial catalyst. Tenacity, commitment, and determination brought Rigoberta recognition as an international advocate for the rights of the Maya—culminating with the Nobel Peace Prize.

Her book was published in 1983 at the height of state terror and an ongoing Guatemalan army “scorched earth” campaign against the Maya that had begun in 1981. Her autobiography and speaking engagements brought attention to the destruction of Maya villages and the brutal killings of the Maya, including members of her own family. Eighteen years after the publication of her book, the Commission for Historical Clarification defined the “scorched earth” campaign as genocidal acts committed against the Maya (CCH, 1999b). When published, Rigoberta’s book, more than any other publication, drew international attention to the plight of the Maya. In the midst of genocide in her country, she offered an alternative vision to the official version of a “war on communism.” In so doing, she became an active subject directly challenging state violence. Her autobiography and political action as a tireless speaker around the world reinserted the Maya, and Maya women in particular, into the historical narrative of Guatemala—firmly placing Maya women in that narrative as conscious subjects, not malleable manipulated instruments.

Although Rigoberta’s book and advocacy brought celebrity to her person and her cause, her efforts were not the first such attempts by Maya women to exercise political agency. Indeed, testimonies of Maya women, as well as archival and forensic research, repeatedly reveal Maya women as "agents rather than instruments" of political mobilization and construction, which was "itself constituted by their participation" (Guha, 1996: 11).

On June 15, 1978, five years before the publication of I, Rigoberta, Amalia Tzordina Coy Pop publicly asserted her political consciousness, self-expression, and agency when she was crowned Indigenous Queen of San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz. Speaking to the crowd of mostly Q’eqchi’ and Pokomchi onlookers in Poxen, she referred to the Pantalà massacre, which had occurred just two weeks earlier. Her statements were not without impact or retribution. A group of local ladinos, angered that she did not give her speech in Spanish and furious that she had spoken about the Pantalà massacre, pressured the mayor of San Cristóbal and
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decided that they would request support from the military to defend their ill-gotten gains. One of the former functionaries recalls, "It was a very friendly meeting. We had lunch. We were even celebrating a birthday. Then, after lunch, we had the real talk — that we were going to call in the army." During this discussion, the group sang a birthday song and shared a cake to celebrate the birthday of one of the functionaries. The meeting ended with the agreement that soldiers would stay in the municipal salon that faced the right side of the plaza in front of the municipal building. Thus, when protesters reached the town plaza, it was surrounded by a platoon of at least 60 soldiers. At the head of the protest was a 60-year-old grandmother, Adelaida Caal Maquin, affectionately known throughout the community as Mami Maquin.

Though there are conflicting versions of exactly how the massacre began, it is certain that Mami Maquin was at the front of the demonstration. Her granddaughters Maria, who was then 12, remembers her grandmother telling the soldiers to put down their pans and allow her to speak with the mayor. Maria also remembers the sudden and loud crack of machine gun fire that separated Mami Maquin's skull from her head. Mami Maquin fell dead in the plaza along with three other Q'eqchi' men, women, and children. Mami Maquin spoke Spanish and had long been organizing her community in their ongoing struggle for land rights throughout the fertile Polochic Valley, where Panzós is located. A 1981 guerilla newsletter publication mentions Mami Maquin as a "patriot" murdered by the military dictatorship (Guatemala News and Information Bureau, 1981: 8). By 1983, that publication includes her in another article about Guatemalan women martyrs and claims she "had joined the guerrillas in the 1960s" (Ibid.: 9). Among the more than 200 survivors and widows interviewed for the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation's report on the Panzós massacre for the Commission for Historical Clarification, all remembered Mami Maquin as a community leader and a rights advocate.

Whether Mami Maquin joined the guerrillas in the 1960s is less the issue here than her tenacity in seizing whatever political spaces might be available for asserting land rights in the 1960s and 1970s. Elder leaders in Q'eqchi', Achi, Ixil, Kanjobal, K'iche', and Q'eqchi' communities (where I conducted fieldwork) commonly began the history of their communities with their lived experience of land struggles and confrontations with the state dating back to the near 14-year dictatorship of General Jorge Ubico, which ended in 1944. The connection between the stories of living Maya elders (both men and women) and Mami Maquin is that her political consciousness, self-expression, and action are representative of lived Maya experiences beyond her individual story. Mami Maquin's leadership role was based on her political experience and reputation within her community as someone who, in the words of a Panzós widow, "always struggled for our rights to land."

Though Mami Maquin's voice was silenced by the massacre, her struggle and legacy as a leader have been memorialized by Guatemalan refugee women in

the fair's beauty pageant committee to remove her title and crown. On June 21, 1978, one week after her speech, a new pageant was held and the committee chose a new indigenous queen — who gave her thanks in Spanish and did not mention the army massacre in Panzós. At the same time, the Guatemala City newspaper El Gráfico reported that the military base in Coban had dispatched army personnel to San Cristóbal to investigate "the content and meaning" of Coy Pop's speech about Panzós. On June 26, 1978, less than one month after the Panzós massacre, Coy Pop traveled to Guatemala City to ask El Gráfico to "make public her eculectic protest against the attitude of the group of ladinos who stripped her of her crown and also to publicly declare that no problems exist in her tranquil community." This was, perhaps, as much a message to the army investigators as it was to the public-at-large. Testimony Number 30348 was given to a REHMI investigator by someone who knew Amalia Pop. Her name is among the thousands listed in Chapter 2, "The Dead," of Volume IV, "Victims of the Conflict." She was killed in August 1983 in Coban — roughly the same time Riescobera's book was published. Amalia Efron's Coy Pop is not alone — as a woman, a Maya, or a beauty queen — in being silenced by state violence. Women of all backgrounds have long been active in Guatemala's struggle, and many of them have been brutally murdered. Rogelio Cruz, a former Miss Guatemala, was a member of the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) in the 1960s. An architect/college student from a middle-class family, she ran a clandestine hospital for the guerrillas in Guatemala City. She was murdered and her body was found hideously tortured and mutilated.6

Mamá Maquin and the Panzós Massacre

Although urban organizing in Guatemala has tended to push for political participation and an end to authoritarian rule, land issues have long been the catalyst to civil society organizing in rural Guatemala. While Rogelio Cruz was running a clandestine hospital for the guerrillas in the 1960s, Mamá Maquin was organizing her community in the Polochic Valley to demand land. By the late 1970s, Mamá Maquin and other Q'eqchi' peasants in Panzós were mobilizing large groups of local Q'eqchi' in land protests. On May 29, 1978, the Guatemalan army opened fire on several hundred Q'eqchi' campesinos who had gathered in front of the municipal offices of Panzós to demand the return of their communal lands. Local fencas owners had illegally seized the lands of several Panzós Q'eqchi' communities and received official titles to those lands through INTA (Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria — National Institute of Agrarian Transformation, better known among the Maya for providing titles for historically Maya lands to ladino fencas owners). Indeed, INTA's vice president in 1978 was the brother of Guatemala's president at the time, General Kjell Laugerud. A few days before the massacre, local fencas owners, the mayor, chief of police, and other municipal functionaries held a meeting in the town offices where it was
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Mexico, who founded a refugee women’s rights organization and named it “Mamá Maquin” (“Estraining I, Rigoberta,” a foundational document of Mami Maquin states, “our history as refugee women is none other than the history of our country: a history of war, poverty, misery, pain, and human rights violations” (Billings, 1995: 14). “Mamá Maquin” was organized in 1990 by refugee women who were "vasturiated by barriers to women’s participation in decision-making regarding their lives in Guatemala” and by the “very Guatemalan refugee organization which specifically united women across ethnic, language, and camp boundaries in southern Mexico” (Ibid., 228). The organization became the space through which women could assert their needs and goals for themselves and their communities. At the first anniversary celebration of the founding of their organization, one leader said: "On this day, Adelina Caal Maquin — Mami Maquin — is present. Mami Maquin died one day defending her land. Here we are also women working to return to our land” (Ibid., 236). As Deborah Billings notes in her research on refugee women in Mexico: “Mami Maquin has provided a social and political space within which women have shared their stories, problems, and analyses with one another, thereby contributing to the process of developing collective identity and oppositional discourse” (Ibid., 273).

La Violencia

In rural Maya communities, such as in the departments of Chimaltenango, Baja Verapaz, Quiché, and Huehuetenango where I worked, La Violencia denotes the time in the life of their community when they suffered extreme violence at the hands of the state and sometimes at the hands of the guerrilla. For urban Guatemalans, La Violencia generally refers to the discrete period of violence during the regimes of General Lucas García (1975-1982) and General Ríos Montt (March 1982-August 1983). La Violencia thus designates the Guatemalan experience of selective state terror in rural and urban Guatemala and its transition to mass terror, culminating in the “scorched earth” campaign. Rural invasions of La Violencia might include the 1978 to 1982 period, or 1978 to 1985 (from the terror of the military regime to the 1985 elections), 1978 to 1990 (from selective violence to the last bombings in the Ixil mountains in 1990), or even 1978 to 1996 (from selective violence through the disappearance of the last civil patriots with the signoff of the 1996 Peace Accords). For rural Maya survivors, whether victims and witness/ies, La Violencia is more than a historical marker of a period of extreme state violence. It represents actual violent events (most Maya begin their testimony of La Violencia with the first act of violence in their community, which typically foresaw the wave of extreme violence to come), as well as the effects of the violence, including their silencing through the near total closing of opportunities for social and political participation and the curtailment of whatever freedom of speech they may have had. Thus, the impossibility of contesting terror was a feature of La Violencia and implicit in its definition and usage. La Violencia is therefore also a point of demarcation between past violence and the contemporary and ongoing contestation of that violence.

When I first visited Guatemala in 1990, I was struck by the use of the term La Situación — the same people applied to La Violencia when they were living it. The shift in vocabulary reflects a change in space for social and political participation, an opening for freedom of speech, perhaps limited in its ambiguity. This expression denounces past violence, and can only be publicly named La Violencia once it has receded into the past. The ability to state La Violencia instead of La Situación represents a shift in power for the individual and community, making it possible to characterize the lived experience more explicitly than the name La Situación allows. La Violencia is perhaps a somewhat neutral term since it lacks direct reference to repression, terror, and state responsibility, but I believe its meaning has also shifted as Guatemalan society has come to terms with its violent past through various forms of truth-telling. Moreover, La Violencia embodies the relationship of the military state with its citizenry; renouncing it from La Situación to La Violencia marks an alteration in the balance of power that defines the state-citizen relationship.

La Violencia is a sociopolitical phenomenon that is valued and revealed in its history and naming. Like the terror of which it was comprised in the past, its memory is a contested terrain upon which the shifting tensions and allegiances of all sectors of Guatemalan society coalesce, adapt, and lose control in their conflicting struggles for domination, liberation, and peace. Along with La Violencia, understood as a product of terror designed and carried out by the Guatemalan state against its citizens, we must contemplate violence as terror (instigent and democratic, urban and rural) and the role of elite economic sectors and international interests. This holistic framework recognizes the significant roles of General Lucas García and Ríos Montt in the design and production of state terror, and provides the opportunity to behold the myriad political spaces created by sectors of civil society under the most oppressive of conditions. To understand La Violencia, it is useful to identify the roles and activities of the Guatemalan army, the insurgency, and democratic movements, as well as the role of the military police force of the state with the citizenry, particularly Maya communities, throughout La Violencia.

Representing Rigoberta

In Rigoberta Menchú’s and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans, David Stoll (1999), an assistant professor of anthropology at Middlebury College, discounts lived experiences of state terror in general and Rigoberta’s experiences in particular, by presenting conjecture and hearsay as fact in attack detailed by Rigoberta’s testimony. The reason he gives for scrutinizing the Nobel Laureate, however, though somewhat buried in the work, is not to grumble about details, but to contest her entire representation of the guerrilla movement and La Violencia of the late 1970s and 1980s. Though Stoll, a former journalist and self-described
of Minnesota Press), multiple panels on the topic at various academic meetings, and research support from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Stoll sees himself as a censored victim in an academy lacking space for debate (see Latin American Perspectives, November 1999). Yet, when Menchú was attacked, doubt was cast not on David Stoll, but on the credibility of the works of Mike Davis and Edward Said — both vocal proponents of multicultural education.

Attempts to silence and marginalize critical voices through diversionary tactics were not limited to these national debates. The timing of the Rigoberta Menchú story (including Stoll’s book and the ensuing media flurry) diverted international attention from the content of state violence to its representation. Just as the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission was about to release its findings on human rights violations in Guatemala and the political violence committed by the Guatemalan military with the support and knowledge of the U.S. government, Stoll’s book blamed the victims for the violence visited upon them by the military — and garnered more media coverage than the CEH report. Stoll makes common cause with the neocolonialists in his effort to challenge the larger claim that the Guatemalan revolutionary and opposition movements had popular support among the Maya in that he argues that guerilla movements, not just in Guatemala but throughout Latin America, promulgated peaceful political and economic reform, and were therefore responsible for provoking army repression.

This position counters the comprehensive findings of the CEH, which chronicle the army’s selective assassination and disappearance of civil society leaders, effectively eliminating peaceful moderation of political and economic conflict. Moreover, Stoll’s personal attacks serve to separate Menchú from the human rights agenda and have clear implications for her place in postwar Guatemala, including the upcoming presidential bid. Further, Stoll’s relentless 10-year research focus on Menchú serves to obscure unresolved questions of land distribution, malnutrition, genocide, and sorcery for the authors and agents of state crimes — the larger truths at issue in Guatemala. How does Stoll’s agenda affect the retelling of this story?

Deconstructing Stoll’s Rewriting of La Violencia

With these debates in mind, let us scrutinize David Stoll’s argument and evidence. One of the most egregious errors in Stoll’s Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans (1999: 71–88) is his misrepresentation of the 1980 massacre at the Spanish Embassy in Guatemala as a self-immolation coordinated by student and indigenous leaders of the peasant protesters occupying the embassy. This fallacy was recently repeated by Ilan Stavans in the Times Literary Supplement in his review of Stoll’s book (April 23, 1999). The 1981 report by Spanish military investigators on the massacre and the recently published findings of the Commission for Historical Clarification conclude that the army carried out a premeditated firebombing of the embassy. Indeed, nearly all accounts of
event charge the army with responsibility for this massacre, in which Vicente Menchú, Rigoberta’s father, was killed, with only the army and Stoll depึting it otherwise. Beyond blaming Vicente Menchú and the other victims of the massacre for their own deaths, at different points in his narrative Stoll labels Menchú “a thief,” “an illegitimate child,” “not supplicatory,” “bitter,” and “a myth” (1999: 25, 32, 104). His narrative strategy appears to be to distract attention from the army’s culpability for its atrocities — a difficult task since the lives of over 200,000 Guatemalans were ultimately claimed through selective assassinations and public acts like firebombing the Spanish Embassy and the massacre of 626 villages. Stoll also tries to make is impossible to sympathize with the victims and survivors of what the Commission has characterized in legal terms as genocidal acts committed against the Maya. In the words of the Commission, agents of the State of Guatemala...committed acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people... All these acts were committed “with intent to destroy in whole or in part. [These] massacres...dismayed a higher, strategically planned policy, manifested in actions which had a logical and coherent sequence (CEH, 1994: 40–41).

The Commission determined that “agents of the state” were responsible for “the arbitrary execution of those inside the Spanish Embassy” and that the “very highest levels of authority of the government of Guatemala are the intellectual authors of this extremely grave violation of human rights.” Moreover, the Commission specifically noted that “the hypothesis that victims self-immolated has no foundation” (CEH, 1999: 14).

While Stoll challenges the details of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonial epic and casts suspicion on the character of Rigoberta and Vicente Menchú, he is quite generous in his descriptions of generals who hold the presidency and were in command of the Guatemalan army at the height of state terror. Despite extensive documentation of army abuses under the presidency of General Kjell Lagergren (1974–1978), for instance, including the May 29, 1978, Panzós massacre, Stoll (1999: 50) claims that under Lagergren “the army scaled back terror.” Lagergren’s successor, General Romeo Lucas García (1978–1982), in turn, ushered in the epoch that would come to be known as La Violencia. A secret Department of State Memorandum (No. 6356, dated October 5, 1981) acknowledged that Lucas García believed that “the policy of repression was “working.” According to the State Department official writing the memo, “a successful policy of repression was one that led to the extermination of the guerrillas, their supporters, and sympathizers.” This is the same Lucas García that Stoll (1999: 5) describes as “doddering.” During General Romeo Lucas García’s regime, his brother Benedicto served as army chief of staff. Credited with the design of the scorched-earth campaign, Benedicto had received combat intelligence and high military command training at the U.S. Army’s School of the Americas.13

Though Stoll (1999: 147) claims that General Efraín Rios Montt, who became president following a 1982 military coup, was able to “rein in the death squads around the capital,” all evidence is to the contrary. Under Rios Montt (1982–1983), massacres remain a key tool of military policy; they intensified in rural Guatemala and urban repression became extreme. In May 1982, the army illegally detained and tortured 11 adolescents in Guatemala City; after two weeks of torture in a clandestine jail, eight survived (see Sanford, 1997: 1–5). During Rios Montt’s regime, along with teachers, students, labor organizers, health workers, priests, nuns, and catechists, even children were considered subversive.

Massacres were not a singular tactic of one military regime, a fact critical to understanding why massacres in Maya communities constitute genocide. Combined with the army’s institutionalized massacres were the destruction of villages and their surrounding fields; and the relentless hunt for survivors: army helicopters dropped bombs upon displaced civilians in the mountains and ground troops encircled and fired upon fleeing aerial attacks. Throughout the regimes of Lagergren, Lucas García, and Rios Montt, these tactics were enacted through a highly sophisticated national strategy under tight order of army command from Guatemala City and with military bases spanning the country, but concentrated in the predominantly indigenous highlands. For massacre survivors who fled to the mountains and later surrendered and rebuilt their villages and lives under army control, surviving state terror has meant the militarization of daily life for up to 15 years. Even when the overt expressions of militarization are withdrawn, internalization of encounters with terror continues to shape relationships within families and communities, as well as community relationships with the nation-state. Surviving testimonies viewed in the context of the discourse and practice of the various phases of state terror can help us understand that while the torture victim’s missing loved one may be interpreted as a sign of survival and the empty army base as a victory for peace, each also represents a living memory of terror that continues to influence daily life. Under these circumstances, discrepancies encountered in testimonies taken in the field should not be taken to indicate faulty memory, invention, or deception. Rather, these contradictions should “lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings” as experienced by survivors and witnesses (Portelli, 1991: 2; see also Lattig, 1998; Langer, 1991).

Moreover, whatever contradictions the researcher in the field may come across, we now have access to a broad range of primary and secondary resources, including declassified CIA and State Department documents, municipal archival records, far-reaching investigations carried out by the Archbishop’s Office and the CEH, and forensic reports from the exhumation of some 5,000 clandestine cemeteries. These documents offer factual and evidentiary corroboration of the context of the terror provided by the testimonies. A declassified CIA document from late February 1982 states that in mid-February 1982, the Guatemalan army had reinforced its existing forces and launched a
sweep operation in the Islí Triángulo. The commanding officers of the units involved have been instructed to destroy all towns and villages which are cooperating with the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) [Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres] and eliminate all sources of resistance (CIA, 1982: 1).

The first point of the memo claims that civilians "who agree to collaborate with the army... will be well treated." Yet, in point three, the CIA acknowledges that "a large number of guerrillas and collaborators have been killed" and comments,

When an army patrol meets resistance and takes fire from a town or village it is assumed that the entire town is hostile and it is subsequently destroyed... An empty village is assumed to have been supporting the EGP, and if it is destroyed

Therefore, those who had heard of army massacres in neighboring villages and abandoned their villages to save their lives had their villages destroyed. The fourth point of the memo concludes that the army high command is "highly pleased with the [initial results of the sweep operation and believes it] will be successful." Significantly, it clarifies that "the army has yet to encounter any guerrilla force in the area" and goes on to conclude that the army's "successes to date appear to be limited to the destruction of several EGP-controlled towns" and "the killing of Indian collaborators and sympathizers." Finally, it justifies the massacres of Indian civilians and destruction of their villages: "The well-documented belief by the army that the entire Islí Indian population is pro-EGP has created a situation in which the army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike" (CIA, 1982: 2-3).

In January 1982, before the internal circulation of these CIA documents, at least 399 civilians were killed in army massacres and operations in 24 Maya communities in seven departments. In two reported massacres, the number of victims was unknown. This took place before the army began the "sweep operation" described in the CIA documents. In February, at least 257 civilian men, women, children, and elderly were killed in army massacres in 22 Maya communities. The number of victims in four of these massacres remains unknown.44 If the CIA documents, despite their convoluted language and censored presentation, acknowledge Guatemalan army massacres of civilians. Further, these documents concur with the Guatemalan army that all Islíes are pro-EGP. This concurrence between the CIA and the Guatemalan army that all Islíes are pro-EGP represents the official confession of political affiliation and ethnicity. Thus, the U.S. Embassy and its officers in Guatemala, the U.S. State Department, and the CIA justify the Guatemalan army's destruction of the social, political, and material culture of the Maya in general and the Islíes in particular.

While denying the reality of the state violence documented by the CIA earlier that year, a November 1982 internal U.S. State Department document analyzing international human rights organizations reflected the CIA's February 1982 view that the Guatemalan army could be expected to "give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike" based on the idea that anyone who did not support the army must support the guerrilla. This now-infamous document claimed that expected international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International (AI) and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) had "successfully carried out a campaign of Communist-backed disinformation." Significantly, the State Department concluded that human rights reports documenting Guatemalan army massacres of unarmed civilians were "a concerted disinformation campaign waged in the United States against the Guatemalan government by groups supporting the left-wing insurgency in Guatemala."

The veracity of AI, WOLA, and other human rights reports can no longer be credibly contested; indeed, recent comprehensive investigations conducted by the Archbishop's Office and the Constitution now confirm that victims of the violence far exceed the commonly cited 440 villages burned off the map by the Guatemalan army, 1.5 million people displaced, 150,000 driven into refuge, and 100,000 to 150,000 killed or disappeared. In its report, the Commission concluded that 626 villages had been destroyed, more than 200,000 people were killed or disappeared, 1.5 million were displaced by the violence, and over 150,000 driven to seek refuge in Mexico. Further, the Commission found the state responsible for 93% of the acts of violence and the guerrillas for three percent. All told, 85% of the victims were Maya and 17% were ladino (see Carmack, 1988; Faix, 1992; Marx, 1988; Smith, 1990; CEH, 1999a, 1999b).

Nonetheless, there are those who continue to contest human rights workers with the guerillas. One high-ranking officer told me that when he thought of human rights workers, he envisioned someone "wearing a Che Guevara beret with a star and carrying a machine gun." Unfortunately, this view is not limited to the Guatemalan military and their advisers. In his book Rigoberta Menchú, as well as as an article on human rights activism, Stoll (1996) reflects the Guatemalan army's rhetoric and practice of blurring the distinctions among guerrilla combatants, land-rights activists, religious workers, and anyone else challenging the military regime or the local non-Maya landholding elite and reducing them to a single category. The same kind of language and identification were used by the army to justify killing off all local leaders, including Mayan priests, literacy promoters, teachers, health workers, and land-rights activists such as Rigoberta's father, Vicente Menchú. Like the 1982 State Department analysis of human rights organizations, Stoll's (1999: 20-11; 1997: 187-188) groups solidarity activists with anti-intervention activists, human rights workers, and academics carrying out research. Within this political schema, anyone who disagrees with Stoll is treated as a supporter of the guerrilla. Interestingly, though, Stoll constructs and deconstructs
Rigoberta Menchú, his own book about Rigoberta cannot withstand the same scrutiny. Significant, then, this Stanford-trained anthropologist’s research falls apart, concrete primary documents are available.

For example, Stoll’s (1999: 48) claims that there was no relationship between the U. S. government and the Guatemalan military regime in the 1980s. This is a wilfully narrow view of an era that saw a continuation and expansion of the counterintelligence and intelligence training for Guatemalan military officers at the School of the Americas, which began as early as 1947. Also in the 1980s, meetings of Central American military leaders (who have jurisdiction over police and internal intelligence) were organized and led by the U. S. State Department with assistance from the CIA, AID, the Guatemalan Police, the Immigration Service, and the Justice Department. According to Williams Bowdler, who represented the State Department in the gatherings (Nairn, 1984), the meetings were “designed to develop ideas for dealing with subversion.”

These meetings led to the parallel development of paramilitary organizations throughout Central America, with death squads known as the Mano Blanca (White Hand) in El Salvador and the Motín (Hand) in Guatemala. The extreme terror waged against civil society in Guatemala in the 1980s killed thousands of peasants and distinguished Guatemala as the first country in which the term “disappeared” came to be used to describe the political condition of being kidnapped by government death squads, tortured to death, and buried in a clandestine grave.

Finally, Stoll must be held accountable for the sources he chose to rely upon to contest Rigoberta’s story. Although he does not generally refer to his key informant by name, he gave a list of them to journalist Larry Robberson for his report in the New York Times (December 5, 1998). One informant is Alfonso Rivasa, whom Robberson introduces as “the chief of the municipal government for 30 years who kept all official records.” In the Times article, Rivasa is critical of Rigoberta’s account of her time in the army, but his criticism is presented as having special authority because of his responsibility to the local government of Usquin. Not mentioned in Robberson’s story or Stoll’s book is that Rivasa was removed from office and jailed in 1994 on charges of corruption and embezzlement of public funds. Neither mentions the collective relationship that local functionaries had to maintain with the military not merely to keep their jobs, but to stay alive during La Violencia. This probably explains why former military commissioner in Usquin identify Rivasa as a trusted friend, while Usquinenses from surrounding villages are suspicious of his army ties and many town dwellers simply describe him as corrupt. It is ironic that Stoll informs us about as a source for his own constructions of history, lack credible sources.

Rural Maya Memories of La Violencia

The army’s justification for violence in rural Maya communities rested upon claims that it was, in the words of former military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt,

"sconcehind communism." (Black, 1984: 11), and Between Two Armies in the Hill Towns of Guatemala. Stoll (1999: 13) argues (1) that guerrillas provoked army repression, and (2) that U.S. support for the guerrillas was the result of “indirect violence,” not a function of preceding grievances, of consciousness-raising, or ideological mobilization. Stoll assumes that La Violencia has only two sides: the guerrillas and the army. Through this binary lens, he concludes that tribes are "best understood as determined neutralists" (Ibid. 132). In La guerra en tierra maya, Yvon de Le Boe (1995: 129), a geologist, anti-Marxist indigenista, maintains that tribes are "famous for being rebels," and that the Xíes are "faithful to this tradition" of rebelliousness. Despite differing conceptions of the "neutral" or "rebels" political "nature" of the Xíes, Le Boe concurs with Stoll that it is the fault of the guerrilla that the army committed mass graves in Maya communities throughout Guatemala. Specifically, Le Boe (1995: 292) notes the EGP’s armed struggle for "proving a bloody bath.

In "Consciousness, Violence, and the Politics of Memory in Guatemala," anthropologist Charles Hale (1997: S17) suggests that the Maya perhaps "re-sponoed to the surge of armed violence with generalized defiance — fed up with army repression, they resistant to cast their lot with the all-or-nothing logic of guerrilla struggle." His main point, however, is to rightly ask: "Is this image accurate? What were they thinking?"

Esperanza, a Kekchi woman, remembers why she joined the guerrilla.

The army arrived and kidnapped three teenage boys. They tortured them and they killed them right in the village. They cut out chunks of flesh and stabbed from many times. The army took two other boys with them. No one in the village had ever seen anything like this. The next day in the afternoon, five heavily armed soldiers returned to the village with these two boys. We almost didn’t recognize them. They had peeled off the sites of their fear so they couldn’t feel. They could hardly walk. These two boys were unable to tolerate the terror of the army, so they started giving names of everyone they knew and they pointed out their houses. The soldiers left the village with these two boys. They took them to the outskirts of the village. They killed them. They cut off their heads and their arms and their legs. They tossed their bodies parts all over the place. They didn’t even leave a whole body for us to shun and bury. About 15 days later, the army returned again and captured two men. One of them was my cousin. They tortured them to death. 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.

Esperanza recalls:

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 who, 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 do for something good. I want a weapon and if I die, I will be killing a soldier.” That is when I accepted the idea of my own death. I decided to find the guerrilla in the mountains and join them. And that is what I did. I was 15 years old (Sanford, 1997: 21–30).

Survivors of the Acal massacre recall that army soldiers lined up the sons and nephews of the exiled elders in front of the grave they had forced the elders to dig. The soldiers said to the elders, “This is what happens when you let your children help the subservients.” When social scientists like French sociologist Yvon Le Bot and U.S. anthropologist David Stoll blame the guerrilla for provoking army massacres, they are repeating the official discourse of the army. They are recovering and transforming the official history of the army, not the lived experiences of massacre survivors.

When army soldiers arrived at Mateo’s village in Ixcan to round up adult men and shoot them in public spaces, they shouted at the peasants, “Es la ley” (“It is the law”). At the time, Mateo was a monolingual Mam speaker. Only after he learned Spanish did he discover that the “law” did not mean the army’s right to kill civilians. Here, as in other instances, the official discourse conflates the real and the imagined. When he learned Spanish, Mateo knew that the soldiers were lying in the sense that “law” does not mean the right of the army to kill civilians, yet were telling the truth in the sense that without the rule of law, guns become the law. Like the soldiers doing the killing and the officers planning and ordering it, there are social scientists who unwittingly participate in what George Orwell (1992: 36) called the “Ministry of Truth,” where “all history is scraped clean and retold exactly as often as necessary.”

The recovery and transformation of official discourse negate the agency of the Maya in general, and monolingual Maya women in particular. Agency is one of the central themes of testimony. Despite the living memory of terror, despite fear and threats, massacre survivors come forward to talk, remember, and share. Through their testimonies, they express fear, sadness, shame, anger, hope, and resolve. They were lied to, shot at, bomed, threatened, beaten, and starved, but the survivors remember their experiences with human agency.

Truth, Reburial, and the Reshaping of History

On May 28, 1998, two decades after the Panzós massacre, I was privileged to accompany the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission to document the Guatemalan army massacre of Qu’eqchi’ Maya peasants in the village of Panzós.21

It was a long, hot ride to Panzós since the rains were unusually late, making the roads extremely dusty. The floating ash from a volcanic eruption and the expansive fires raging out of control in the nearby Petén cast a haze over the sky, obscuring the mountains of Cobán and the lowland hills. Chunks of ash lightly gliding through the air left soot marks on the hunds that grabbed them. Months without rain had transformed the road to Panzós into a path of white powder. Peasants walking along the road scurried out of the path of oncoming vehicles, but there was no escaping the ensuing cloud of white dust that covered everyone and everything, as if they had been dipped in flour.

As we rounded the bend just past the cemetery, there was yelling, applause, and the honking of a hand-held horn. We were stopped in the middle of the road, surrounded by a cheering crowd. More than 400 people were waiting by the cemetery near the entrance to Panzós. As we got out of the truck, widows I had interviewed nine months earlier laughed, shouted, smiled, and cried. They embraced and kissed us.

Before we could take the bones to the municipal center for placement in coffins, the community wanted us to unload the cardboard boxes at the cemetery. Everyone wanted to help unload the trucks. Each woman wanted to carry a box. The elder women performed a Maya custum until the sky opened in a heavy downpour. We ran the half mile down the road to the church. The women ran with the boxes on their heads.

When we reached the church, the women had placed the 38 boxes at the altar, seemingly unbothered that they almost completely blocked the speakers from sight. While wringing the rain out of their skirts and shirts, almost everyone smiled — even those with tears running down their faces. There was a collective sense of victory. Those monolingual Qu’eqchi’ women had successfully stood up to those who threatened them, to those who killed their husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers. Several Young’eqchi’ men stood at the podium speaking in Qu’eqchi’. The widows continued to talk among themselves in an oddly festive atmosphere. Smiling as they dried their faces, they seemed almost oblivious to the men speaking to them from the podium.

Just as I wondered whether any of the widows would speak, María, the grandson of Mami Maquín, approached the podium. After nervously looking down at the podium, María lifted her head, peered across the crowd filling the church, and said, “I am not afraid. I am not ashamed. I am not embarrassed.” The church fell silent except for her words and the slapping of water upon the roof and the ground outside. All the widows stopped talking and focused their attention on her, her scattered conversations in the church stopped. A bilingual health worker approached me: “This is important,” she said, and began to translate María’s words from Qu’eqchi’ to Spanish.
The Silencing of Maya Women

Ttranquility seems to replace the painted look on her face. She is aloof and says calmly, 'Before, there was fear. But not now. That is why I speak clearly of the pain I have suffered.' Her words pass over the crowd as a wave of satisfaction, almost a happiness.

We are here to receive the remains of our loved ones, as I thank the forever.' All the widows make eye contact with each of us and smile. 'We see in total agreement that the truth be known. We don’t want to suffer like in the past. If we can talk about the past and all the bad things that happened, then we can say, never again.' The entire crowd seems in unison in agreement. With the entire crowd mesmerized and waiting for Maria’s words, she concludes, ‘I love, life, and law. A man has no right to break the law of god. Man is not god. Only god can take life. We speak because we are not afraid. We speak from the heart.'

In Book of the Embrace, Eduardo Galeano notes that the root of recordar, to remember, is from the Latin recordar, which means ‘to pass back through the heart.’ The public remembering of Maria Maquita, this passing back through the heart before her community, is the very essence of the discourse and practice of human agency, of political consciousness, self-representation, and action. Her story is not the story of dead people, though the dead are present. These stories from Panzós, Acul, Ixnic, and Huehuetenango are stories of the living — those who survived and have much to share whose given the opportunity to speak. Maria Maquita was silenced in the Panzós massacre, but her memory grew far beyond the confines of Panzós. Maria Maquita broke the silencing of the Panzós survivors with her public testimony in 1998, as Rigoberta Menchú broke the silencing of the Maya with her testimony in 1983. Feliciano, a non-lingual Ixil speaker, once said to me through a translator, ‘No se si tiene valor mis palabras, pero quiero contar mi historia.’ (I don’t know if my words have value, but I want to tell you my story.) I believe the words of Esparranza, Mataco, Feliciana, Maria, and other survivors have great value. I am not alone in this belief. In his work on history, memory, and the Holocaust, Dominick LaCapra (1998: 11) affirms that ‘testimony is a crucial source for history’ and that it is ‘more than a source’ because it ‘poses special challenges’ and ‘raises the issue of the way in which the historian...becomes a secondary witness...and must work out an acceptable subject position to the witness and his or her testimony.’

When anthropologists, sociologists, and historians fail to consider the Maya as actors in their own history, they commit a discursive silencing of human agency. They compound the terror of La Violencia by not taking into account the voices of the survivors — in effect, they silence them. Thus, however unwittingly, they compound the political, social, cultural, physical, and material violence with discursive violence. Twenty years after the Panzós massacre, I sat with Maria at the massacre victims were buried and remembered in a Maya religious ceremony. We shared a bag of water in the heat. Her eighty-year-old son picked up a pamphlet about the...
Panamá massacre. She smiled proudly, almost mischievously, and nodded at him with approval. Just as she was her grandmother’s faith in a better future, her son is hers. Easily and quickly, he read the words of Mario Benedetti:

Continuamos porque los sobrevivientes de nuestros muertos quieren que continúemos.

NOTES

1. Based on testimonies from numerous survivors in Acul, Truthful, and other villages in the ball area, as well as from Xoáx, Calotí, Bang Suyú, and Plan de San Juan, Baja Verapaz.

2. La Violencia (the violence) generally refers to extreme political repression and state violence between 1978 and 1984.

3. Gulla was referring to the woman who participated in India’s Telangana movement (1946–1951).

4. For more on the history of the revuelta indígena, see González-Riviereco (1998).


7. Acher wrote, and because Mario Maquíno has become a public figure quoted in Guatemalan and international newspapers due to her outspoken efforts to lead and organize the Panamá community for public recognition of the 1978 massacre, María Maquíno’s real name is used here.

8. Author’s interview, September 1997.


15. McKay’s above analysis of the U.S. role in developing paramilitary organizations in northern Central America in further confirmed by the following declassified CIA and State Department documents: United States Embassy in Guatemala Memorandum to the Secretary of State on September 15, 1962; March 15, 1963; and, January 23, 1964. See also Memorandum of the Special Group, September 23, 1963, telegram from U.S. Embassy in Guatemala to the State Department, January 5, 1964; Public Safety Division (OSA) Guate Mayan, “Operational Rapes of Terrorist Kidnapping and Guatemala Police Activity” to Counter, December 1965.” CIA Memorandum dated March and April 1996. All declassified documents cited in this article are now available with the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C.

16. Indigena refers to activists who have self-identified with and support so-called Fourth World Struggles.

17. Ejército Guatemalteco de las Fuerzas — Guerrilla Army of the Poor.

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