

## FROM I, RIGOBERTA TO THE COMMISSIONING OF TRUTH

MAYA WOMEN AND THE RESHAPING OF GUATEMALAN HISTORY

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*Let our history be as factual, logical, reliable and documented as a history book needs to be. But also let it contain the dialogic history of its making, and the experience of its makers.*

—Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*

*The writing of history, both archival and oral, is necessarily a theoretical and political activity which makes it a practice in and for the present. Theory, politics and current trends are driving forces of this practice even when their existence is overlooked or denied.*

—Popular Memory Group, *Making Histories*

Officially erasing both community and individual memory and agency, the Guatemalan army, elite interests, and some academics have attempted to explain Maya political activism as a manipulation of the Maya by the guerrillas and/or popular organizations and religious groups. Indeed, such representations of the Maya tend to conflate or draw little to no distinction between these sectors, thus reinforcing the official conflation of ethnicity with political affiliation. I suggest that the perception of the “manipulated” Maya is a recovery and transformation of the official story. Like the official story upon which it is based, it shares the same racist ideational foundation that denies political consciousness and free will to the Maya; to explain away Maya political action as a manipulation is to negate the memory and agency of Maya communities, families, and individuals. In this article, I explore testimony, official discourse, and truth in popular memory in relationship to the still contested reconstruction of Guatemalan history. It is my intention to posit that

understanding the political ideologies and mobilizations of these organizations through Maya experience, instead of official state discourse, offers a more nuanced analysis of Maya political activism as experienced by the majority of rural Maya, remembered within their world cosmology, and expressed in their political memory and agency as conscious subjects.

## RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ AND THE SMALL VOICE OF HISTORY

In "The Small Voice of History," Ranajit Guha 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 univocity of state discourse" and (2) "put the question of agency and instrumentality back in the narrative" (Guha 1996, 11).<sup>1</sup>

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 as *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* in 1984). 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 that, 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 of Rigoberta's family, which becomes the vehicle for the outsider (both non-Maya Guatemalans and the international community) to understand the struggle of the Maya in Guatemala to defend their lands, communities, and culture in the face of ever-increasing state violence. Rigoberta's standing in the world community as Maya, female, and campesina was transformed by her book and multiple speaking engagements in Europe and the United States. Thus, Rigoberta came to represent the antithesis of stereotypes of Maya women as silent, traditional, static, without politics, and without agency. Indeed, *I, Rigoberta*, and later Rigoberta herself, demanded recognition of Maya women as more than pawns of 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 very 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.

Published at the height of state terror in 1983 as the Guatemalan army continued its scorched earth campaign begun against the Maya in 1981, her book described the destruction of Maya villages and brutal killings of the Maya including members of her own family. Sixteen years after the publication of her book, the Commission for Historical Clarification defined the scorched earth campaign as genocidal acts committed against the Maya (CEH 1999c). But sixteen years earlier, 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 and, in so doing, firmly placed herself as an active subject directly challenging state violence. Through her self-expression in her autobiography and her political action as a tireless speaker around the world, she put the Maya in general, and Maya women in particular, back into the historical narrative of Guatemala—and firmly placed Maya women in that narrative as conscious subjects, not malleable manipulated instruments.

While 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, again and again reveal Maya women as "agents rather than instruments" of political mobilization and contestation that was "itself constituted by their participation" (Guha 1996, 11). As I have written elsewhere, Maya women did not have a homogenized response to state violence (Sanford 1997, 2000b). Some protested peacefully, some organized or participated in popular organizations, some joined the guerrillas, some fled into refuge in the mountains, Mexico, or the United States, and some suffered in isolated silence.

Moreover, avenues of protest and resistance were varied and often expressed in seemingly unusual places. For example, on June 15, 1978, two weeks after the Panzós massacre and five years before the publication of *I, Rigoberta*, Amalia Erondina Coy Pop publicly

asserted her political consciousness, self-expression, and agency when she was crowned Indigenous Queen of San Cristóbal, Alta Verapaz.<sup>2</sup> Speaking to the crowd of mostly Q'eqchi' and Poqomchi' onlookers in Poqomchi', she made reference to the Panzós massacre that had occurred just two weeks earlier. Her statements were not without impact or retribution. A group of local ladinos, angered that she had not given her speech in Spanish and furious that she had spoken about the Panzós massacre, pressured the mayor of San Cristóbal and the fair's beauty pageant committee to remove her title and crown.

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 energetic protest against the attitude of the group of ladinos who stripped her of her crown and also to declare publicly that no problems exist in her tranquil community" (July 26, 1978, 7). This was, perhaps, as much a message to the army investigators as it was to the public at large. Testimony Number 30,478 was given to a REHMI investigator by someone who knew Amalia Pop. Her name is among the thousands listed in chapter 2, "Los Muertos" (The dead), of volume 4 of *Nunca Más: Víctimas del Conflicto* (Never again: Victims of the conflict) (ODHA 1998, 268). She was killed in August 1983 in Coban—roughly the same time Rigoberta's book was published.

Amalia Eroncina Coy Pop is not alone—not 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 for justice, and many of them have been brutally murdered.<sup>3</sup> Rogelio Cruz, a former Miss Guatemala, was a member of the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) in the 1960s. An architecture student from a middle-class family, she ran a clandestine hospital for the guerrillas in Guatemala City. She was kidnapped by paramilitary forces. Several days later, the former Miss Guatemala's lifeless, mutilated body was found at the side of a main road in Guatemala City (Guatemala News and Information Bureau, March/April 1983, 4, 2: 9). Indeed, the Guatemalan state, like other military states, had a very gendered response to the political actions of women. Psychologist Nancy Caro Hollander has noted that during the military regimes of Chile,

Argentina, and Uruguay, officers, soldiers, and paramilitary forces had free rein to express the “fundamentally misogynist attitudes of the military” (Hollander 1997, 95). She explained:

Female political activists, who represented the antithesis of bourgeois femininity, became a special target of the terrorist state. They embodied not only a revolutionary challenge to existing class relations but an assertion of self that challenged male hegemony in the psychological as well as political domain (95).

The point of introducing the actions of Amalia Erondina Coy Pop and Rogelio Cruz along with Rigoberta Menchú’s is to underscore that while Rigoberta’s political life is widely known, her experience of political action is not unique. In this sense, *I, Rigoberta* rightly embodies the essence of testimonio, which is a “narration of urgency” (Jara and Vidal 1986, 3), “a powerful textual affirmation of the speaking subject itself” (Beverly and Zimmerman 1990, 175) connected to “a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression and struggle” (Beverly 1996, 34), and a narration that “always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability of the reader’s world must be brought into question” (36).

## MAMÁ MAQUÍN AND THE PANZÓS MASSACRE

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 protest for the return of their communal lands that had been illegally seized by local *finca* owners. A few days prior to the massacre, the *finca* owners, the mayor, chief of police, and other municipal functionaries held a meeting in the town offices where it was 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 could stay in the municipal salon that faced the right side of the plaza in front of the municipal building. Thus, when protesters arrived at the town plaza, it was surrounded by a platoon of at least sixty soldiers. At the head of the protest was a sixty-year-old grandmother, Adelina Caal Maquín, affectionately known throughout the community as Mamá Maquín.

Though there are conflicting versions of exactly how the massacre began, it is certain that Mamá Maquín was at the front of the demonstration. Her granddaughter María, who was then twelve, remembers her grandmother telling the soldiers to put their guns down and allow her to speak with the mayor. María also remembers the sudden and loud crack of machine-gun fire that separated Mamá Maquín's skull from her head. Mamá Maquín fell dead in the plaza along with thirty-four other Q'eqchi' men, women, and children.<sup>4</sup> Mamá Maquín 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 guerrilla solidarity publication mentions Mamá Maquín as a "patriot" murdered by the military dictatorship (Guatemala News and Information Bureau 1981, 2, 5: 8). In 1983, the same publication includes her in an article about Guatemalan women martyrs and claims she "joined the guerrillas in the 1960s" (Guatemala News and Information Bureau 1983, 4, 2: 9). Of the more than two hundred survivors and widows interviewed for the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation's report on the Panzós massacre for the Commission for Historical Clarification, everyone remembered Mamá Maquín as a community leader and land rights advocate.

Whether Mamá Maquín had indeed joined the guerrillas in the 1960s is less the issue here than her tenacity in seizing whatever political spaces might have been available for asserting land rights, whether in the 1960s or 1970s. Among elder leaders in Q'eqchi', Achí, Ixil, Kanjobal, K'iche, and Q'aqchiquel communities, it was common for them to give the history of their communities beginning with their lived experience of land struggles and confrontations with the state dating back to the near-fourteen-year dictatorship of General Jorge Ubico that ended in 1944. The connection between the stories of living Maya elders (both men and women) to Mamá Maquín is that

her political consciousness, self-expression, and action are representative of lived Maya experiences beyond her individual story and that the leadership role she held in her community was based on Mamá Maquín's 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 Mamá Maquín's voice was silenced by the massacre, her struggle and legacy as a leader have been memorialized by Guatemalan refugee women in Mexico who founded a refugee women's rights organization and named it "Mamá Maquín." Echoing *I, Rigoberta*, a foundational document of Mamá Maquín 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).

### **THE PANZÓS MASSACRE AND THE COMMISSION FOR HISTORICAL CLARIFICATION**

When the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) decided that it wanted to carry out its own investigation of a massacre, including a forensic exhumation of the massacre victims, the Panzós massacre was always foremost in the discussions among both the CEH and the human rights groups with which it consulted.<sup>5</sup> Among the hundreds of known clandestine cemeteries of massacre victims, why did Panzós so easily bring consensus? Panzós was a large massacre. CEH and human rights leaders estimated the number of victims to be at least two hundred. Panzós was historically important because it was the first massacre in what came to be known as "La Violencia" (1978–1985). For many human rights leaders, Panzós was also the appropriate place to do an exhumation with the presence of the CEH and the UN Mission because by the late 1990s, the Polochic Valley was better known for drug trafficking than other exports. Additionally, because Panzós had been the first such massacre and had resonated with urban dissatisfaction with the military, it had galvanized significant urban attention and, therefore, in contrast to other massacres, Panzós was remembered as a historical marker in

the chronology of La Violencia. Through the CEH's exhumation, Panzós would remain a historical marker, but with transformed meaning. The story of Panzós and its impact on the community would be a marker not only in the history of La Violencia, but a marker of historical clarification and truth—the very essence of the Commission's mission in uncovering the events and meanings of La Violencia.

## LA VIOLENCIA

In the rural communities where I have worked, the departments of Chimaltenango, Baja Verapaz, Alta Verapaz, Quiché, and Huehuetenango, rural Maya use "La Violencia" to name 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 guerrillas. In urban Guatemala, "La Violencia" generally refers to the discrete period of violence experienced under the regimes of General Romeo Lucas García (1978–1982) and General Ríos Montt (March 1982 through August 1983), a period of selective state terror in rural and urban Guatemala and its transition to mass terror culminating in the scorched earth campaign. Rural invocations of "La Violencia" might be limited to this time period, but they were just as likely to include 1978–1985 (from the terror of the military regimes to the 1985 elections), 1978–1990 (from selective violence to the last bombings in the Ixil mountains in 1990), or even 1978–1996 (from selective violence through the disarming of the last civil patrols with the signing of the 1996 peace accords). For rural Maya survivors, victims, and victimizers as well, La Violencia represents more than a historical marker of a period of extreme state violence. It represents not only the actual violent events (most Maya begin their testimony of La Violencia with the first act of violence in their community that typically foretold of the wave of extreme violence to come), but also the effects of the violence, which included their silencing through the near total closing of opportunities for social and political participation, which in turn further curtailed whatever freedom of speech they may have had. Thus, the impossibility to contest the terror was one of the



effects of La Violencia and is implicit in both its definition and usage. In this way, the term “La Violencia” is used as a demarcation between the violence of the past and a contemporary and ongoing contestation of that violence as well.

When I first visited Guatemala in 1990, I was struck by the use of the term “La Situación”—which is how people named La Violencia when they were living it. In this sense, the change in vocabulary reflects a change in space for social and political participation, an opening for freedom of speech perhaps limited in its ambiguity, but an expression that is an action in its denouncement of the past (*la violencia*), which can only be publicly named as La Violencia when it becomes the past. In other words, to be able to state “La Violencia” instead of “La Situación” represents a shift in power for the individual and community to name the lived experience and to do so with a far more explicit name than “La Situación.” Though one might argue that “La Violencia” is a somewhat neutral term in that it lacks explicit reference to repression, terror, and state responsibility, I would argue that 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, and changing the name of this relationship from “La Situación” to “La Violencia” marks a shift in the balance of power that defines the relationship between the state and its citizens.

All told, La Violencia is a sociopolitical phenomenon both veiled and revealed in its history and naming. Like the terror that comprised it in the past, its memory is a contested terrain upon which the shifting tensions and allegiances of all sectors of Guatemalan society create, adapt, and lose control in their conflicting struggles for domination, liberation, and peace. In this way, while the phenomena of La Violencia must be understood as a result of terror designed and carried out by the Guatemalan state against its citizens, resistance to terror—both insurgent and democratic, as well as the role of elite economic sectors and international interests, must also be contemplated. This holistic framework recognizes the significant roles of Generals Lucas García and Ríos Montt in the design and production of state terror, but also provides the opportunity to behold the myriad political spaces created by sectors of civil society under the most repressive of

conditions. To understand La Violencia, I suggest, it is useful to identify the roles and activities of the Guatemalan army, insurgency and democratic movements, and the interplay of each of these with the citizenry, particularly Maya communities, throughout La Violencia.

## THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF TERROR

In my research, I have identified seven phases in the phenomenology of terror:<sup>6</sup> (1) pre-massacre community organization and experiences with violence; (2) the massacre; (3) post-massacre life in flight in the mountains; (4) transitional return from the mountains, surrendering to the army in the municipality; (5) army-directed return to the villages and construction of “model” villages; (6) community life under army control; and (7) living memory of terror (Sanford 1997).

An in-depth study of the phases of the phenomenology of terror offers an opportunity to understand genocide and terror from survivor experiences and memories of those experiences. It also allows us to see quite clearly that when the Guatemalan army shifted its policy of repression from selective assassination in the late 1970s to large-scale killings in the early 1980s, it shifted to a prolonged genocidal campaign against the Maya, beginning with selective massacres in Maya villages all over the country and then shifting to massacres of entire Maya communities. Critical to understanding why these massacres constitute genocide is the fact that massacres were not a singular tactic of the army; the army combined massacres with a scorched earth campaign that included not only the complete destruction of Maya villages and surrounding fields, but also the relentless hunt for survivors with army helicopters dropping bombs on displaced civilians in the mountains and ground troops encircling and firing on those fleeing aerial attacks.

An October 5, 1981, Department of State Memorandum classified as Secret acknowledged that then dictator General Romeo Lucas García believed that “the policy of repression” was “working” and the state department official writing the memo described the “extermination of the guerrillas, their supporters and sympathizers” as the measure of a “successful” policy of repression.<sup>7</sup> This is the same General

Lucas García whom anthropologist David Stoll described as “doddering” in his book on Rigoberta Menchú (1999, 51). During General Romeo Lucas García’s dictatorial reign as president, his brother Benedicto served as Minister of Defense. In addition to Romeo’s discussions with the U.S. Department of State about his “successful policy of repression,” his brother Benedicto, who is credited with the design of the scorched earth campaign, received combat intelligence and high military command training at the U.S. Army School of the Americas (School of the Americas yearly lists of Guatemalan military officers trained at SOA released by the Department of State).<sup>8</sup> With a highly sophisticated national strategy under tight order of army command from Guatemala City to military bases that spanned the country and were concentrated in the predominantly indigenous highlands and lowlands, ground troops and aerial forces carried out orders to massacre Maya in hamlets and then saturate the mountains with firepower in the Lucas García brothers’ attempt to exterminate the unarmed Maya men and women, including children and elderly, who had fled the massacres and destruction of their communities.

For massacre survivors who fled to the mountains, surrendered to the army, and later rebuilt their villages and their lives under army control, surviving these phases of terror meant living daily life in extremely militarized circumstances for up to fifteen years following a massacre. When the overt expressions of militarization are withdrawn, internalization of encounters with terror continues to shape and define individual relationships within families and communities, as well as community relationships with the nation-state. Survivor testimonies, viewed in the context of the discourse and practice of the various phases of state terror, help us to understand that while the torture victim’s missing tooth 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 shape and define daily life. Discrepancies found in the taking of testimony should not be taken to indicate a faulty memory, an invention, or a lie, rather these contradictions should “lead us through and beyond facts to their meaning” (Portelli 1991, 26) as experienced by survivors and witnesses.

Still, regardless of whatever contradictions the researcher in the field may come across, there now exists wide access to an ample and

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 Commission for Historical Clarification, as well as the forensic reports of more than one hundred exhumations of clandestine cemeteries. These documents offer factual and evidentiary corroboration to the context of the terror provided by the testimonies.

A declassified secret CIA document from late February, 1982, states that in mid-February of 1982, the Guatemalan Army had reinforced its existing forces and launched a "sweep operation in the Ixil Triangle. 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) and eliminate all sources of resistance" (CIA 1982, 1). Point one of the memo claims that civilians "who agree to collaborate with the army . . . will be well treated." Then, in point three of the memo, the CIA acknowledges that "a large number of guerrillas and collaborators have been killed." Point three concludes with "COMMENT: 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 it is destroyed." Point four cynically concludes that the Army High Command is "highly pleased with the initial results of the sweep operation and believes it will be successful." The CIA then 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." Point four concludes with "COMMENT: The well documented belief by the army that the entire Ixil 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" (2-3).

In January 1982, prior to the internal circulation of these CIA documents, a minimum of 399 civilians were killed in army massacres and operations in twenty-four different Maya communities in seven different departments. In two reported massacres, the number of victims was unknown. All of this is before the army began its "sweep operation" so cynically, but aptly, described in the CIA

documents. In the month of February, at least 327 civilian men and women, including children and elderly, were killed in army massacres in twenty-two different Maya communities.<sup>9</sup> The number of victims in four of the massacres still remains unknown.

### **THE CONFLATION OF ETHNICITY WITH POLITICAL AFFILIATION**

If anything, CIA documents, despite their convoluted language and censored presentation, acknowledge Guatemalan army massacres of civilians and also concur with the Guatemala army that all Ixiles are "pro-EGP." This concurrence between the CIA and the Guatemalan army represents the official conflation of ethnicity with political affiliation. Thus, the U.S. embassy and its officers in Guatemala, the U.S. State Department, and the CIA justify Guatemalan army destruction of the social, political, and material culture of the Maya in general and the Ixiles in particular. This justification is based on the conflated idea that all Ixiles are pro-EGP.

While publicly denying the reality of state violence documented by the CIA earlier that year, a November 1982 internal State Department document analyzing international human rights organizations reflects the sentiments of the CIA's February 1982 secret document that affirmed the Guatemalan army would "give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike," based on the idea that anyone who did not support the army must support the guerrillas. This now infamous internal State Department document claimed that respected international human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) had "successfully carried out a campaign of Communist-backed disinformation" (1982, 2). Further, and most important, 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" (2).

The veracity of the human rights reports of Amnesty International, WOLA, and others can no longer be credibly contested, and,

in fact, recent comprehensive investigations conducted by the Archbishop's Office (ODHA 1998) and the CEH (1999a, 1999b) 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 (Carmack 1998; Falla 1992; Manz 1988; Smith 1990). Indeed, in its recently published 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 more than 150,000 driven to seek refuge in Mexico. Further, the Commission found the state responsible for 93 percent of the acts of violence and the guerrillas for 3 percent. All told, 83 percent of the victims were Maya and 17 percent were ladino (CEH 1999a, 1999b).

### DECONSTRUCTING DAVID STOLL'S REWRITING OF LA VIOLENCIA<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, there are those who continue to conflate human rights workers with the guerrillas. Not surprisingly, this conflation is easy to come by among Guatemalan army officers. One high-ranking official told me that when he thought of human rights workers, he envisioned someone wearing a Ché Guevara beret with a star and carrying a machine gun. That is to say, in his mind's eye, there was no difference between an armed insurgent and a human rights worker. Unfortunately, this view is not limited to the Guatemalan military and its advisors. In *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (1999), as well as in an article on human rights activism (1996), David Stoll also reflects Guatemalan army rhetoric and practice in that he conflates guerrilla combatants with land rights activists, with religious workers, and anyone else challenging the military regime or local non-Maya landholding elite. It was the same type of language and conflation 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 internal 1982 State Department analysis of human rights organizations, Stoll conflates solidarity

activists with anti-intervention activists, with human rights workers, and with academics carrying out research (1999, 10–11; 1996, 187–88). Within this political schema, anyone who disagrees with Stoll is homogenized into someone who supported or supports the guerrillas. Interestingly, though Stoll both constructs and deconstructs Rigoberta Menchú, his own book about Rigoberta cannot withstand the type of scrutiny to which he subjected her book. And, significantly, the places where this U.S.-trained academic's research falls apart is in exactly the places where concrete primary documents are available.

For example, Stoll provides a review of recent Guatemalan history in which he claims there was a lack of relationship between the U.S. government and the Guatemalan military regime in the 1960s (1999, 48). This is a curious summary of that era, which included an expanded continuation of counterinsurgency and intelligence training for Guatemalan military officers at the School of the Americas. In fact, School of the Americas documents date this training relationship with Guatemala back to 1947. Additionally, in the 1960s, meetings of Central American ministers of the interior (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 Customs Bureau, the Immigration Service, and the Justice Department. These meetings were "designed to develop ways of dealing with subversion," according to William Bowdler, who represented the State Department at the gatherings (Nairn 1984, 21).<sup>11</sup> These meetings led to the parallel development of paramilitary organizations throughout Central America and their death squads, known as the *Mano Blanco* (White Hand) in El Salvador and the *Mano* (Hand) in Guatemala. The extreme terror waged against civil society in Guatemala in the 1960s killed thousands of peasants and distinguished Guatemala as the first country where "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.

One of the most egregious errors in Stoll's rewriting of history is his representation that a massacre at the Spanish embassy in Guatemala in 1980 was actually a self-immolation coordinated by student and indigenous leaders of peasant protesters occupying the embassy (1999, 71–88). Both Spanish military investigators in their

1981 report on the massacre and the Commission for Historical Clarification concluded that the army carried out a premeditated firebombing of the embassy (CEH 1999b, 14). Indeed, all accounts of this massacre, except for the Guatemalan Army's and David Stoll's, charge that the Guatemalan Army committed the massacre (in which land rights leader Vicente Menchú, Rigoberta's father, was killed). In addition to blaming the victims of the massacre for their own deaths, in different points in his narrative, Stoll labels deceased Vicente Menchú as "a thief," "an illegitimate child," "not supplicatory," "bitter," and a "myth" (1999, 25, 32, 104).

Stoll's narrative strategy appears to be to distract attention from the army's culpability for its atrocities—a difficult task given that these range from selective assassinations to such public acts as the firebombing of the Spanish Embassy and massacres of 626 villages, acts that finally claimed the lives of more than 200,000 Guatemalans. At the same time, he tries to make suspect any sympathy one might feel for 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 . . . obeyed a higher, strategically planned policy, manifested in actions which had a logical and coherent sequence" (CEH 1999a, 40–41). Of the Spanish embassy massacre in particular, it 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 1999b, 14).

It is ironic that Stoll undermines testimony as a resource for history when his own reconstructions of history lack credible sources. Testimony has been and continues to be the principle avenue by which semiliterate and nonliterate people can communicate their world to potential supporters of their struggles. Rigoberta Menchú, like her father Vicente, never claimed to be apolitical. Testimony is itself inherently political and Stoll attacks the very essence of Rigoberta



and *I, Rigoberta Menchú*: the right of Maya women to political consciousness, self-representation, and political action.

## RURAL MAYA MEMORIES OF LA VIOLENCIA

Army justification of violence in rural Maya communities has rested upon its claims that the army was, in the words of former military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, “scorching communists” (Black 1984, 11). In *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*, David Stoll argues (1) that guerrillas provoked army repression and (2) that Ixil support for the guerrillas was the result of “dual violence,” not a “function of preexisting grievances, of consciousness-raising or ideological mobilization” (Stoll 1994, 95). Stoll assumes La Violencia has only two sides: the guerrillas and the army. Through this binary lens, he concludes that Ixiles “are best understood as determined neutralists” (132). In *La guerra en tierras mayas*, Yvon Le Bot, a polemical, anti-Marxist *indigenista*,<sup>12</sup> maintains that Ixiles are “famous for being rebels” and that the Ixiles are “faithful to this tradition” of rebelliousness (Le Bot 1995, 129). Despite differing conceptions of the neutral or rebellious political “nature” of the Ixiles, Le Bot concurs with Stoll that it is the fault of the guerrillas that the army committed massacres in Maya communities throughout Guatemala. Specifically, Le Bot blames the EGP’s<sup>13</sup> armed struggle for “provoking a blood bath” (292). It is important to note that the CEH concluded “that a full explanation of the Guatemalan confrontation cannot be reduced to the sole logic of two armed parties” because

such an interpretation fails to explain or establish the basis for the persistence and significance of the participation of the political parties and economic forces in the initiation, development and continuation of the violence; nor does it explain the repeated efforts at organization and the continuous mobilization of those sectors of the population struggling to achieve their economic, political and cultural demands. (1999b, 21)

Based on more than 350 survivor testimonies, my analysis of pre-massacre community organizing and experiences with violence,

which is phase one of the phenomenology of terror I have developed, demonstrates that (1) guerrilla organizing and guerrilla military operations were sometimes, but not always, present in Maya communities prior to the massacres; (2) forced recruitment of army-controlled civil patrols and participation of civil patrollers in acts of violence against civilians sometimes, though not always, occurred in communities prior to the massacres; (3) participation of army-controlled civil patrols in acts of violence against civilians always occurred in communities where civil patrols were organized; (4) some form of church or community organizing to improve the quality of village life was always present prior to the massacres; (5) Guatemalan army operations were always present in villages prior to massacres; and (6) villages always experienced acts of violence perpetrated by the army prior to the actual massacres.

In “Consciousness, Violence, and the Politics of Memory in Guatemala,” anthropologist Charles Hale suggests that the Maya perhaps “responded to the surge of armed violence with generalized defiance—fed up with army repression yet hesitant to cast their lot with the all-or-nothing logic of guerrilla struggle” (1997, 817). His main point, however, is to rightly ask, “Is this image accurate? What *were* they thinking?”<sup>14</sup>

Esperanza, a Kanjobal woman, remembers why she joined the guerrillas:

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 them 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 soles of their feet so they couldn’t run. They could hardly walk. 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 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 body parts all over the place. They didn’t even leave a whole body for us to mourn and bury. About fifteen 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.

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 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 fifteen years old. (Sanford 1997, 21–30)

It is not just the Guatemalan army that finds the phenomenon of young women, and especially young Maya women, joining the guerrillas to be disconcerting. At the Latin American Studies Association (Chicago, 1998), I gave a paper entitled "No sé si tiene valor mis palabras—I don't know if my words have value: The Silencing of Maya Women," in which I presented La Violencia from the gendered perspective of Maya women, most of whom were massacre survivors, some of whom, like Esperanza, had joined the guerrillas, and one of whom had said to me, "I don't know if my words have value, but I would like to tell you my story." A colleague at the conference commented to me that she was "concerned" that I was "creating" the "outdated singular revolutionary subject" by including Esperanza's testimony in my paper. Yet, to exclude Esperanza's experience and others like hers would be to fall into the trap Veena Das has observed whereby "the entire field of transgressions, disorder and violence remains outside the anthropologist's privileged domains of inquiry." Moreover, it would reproduce the anthropologist in the primary position as "the subject of discourse" and further entrench the Maya as the subject of anthropologists (Das 1989, 310). Rather than seeking understanding of Maya experience through their own self-defined positions as conscious political subjects, to negate the authenticity of those Maya who self-identify in discourse and action as revolutionary subjects is to "create order by eliminating the chaos that the introduction of the subject might create" (ibid.). Indeed, it is the very *displacement* of the central position of the anthropologist, along with the subaltern as the anthropologist's subject, that Das sees as a central

contribution of subaltern studies. Likewise, Ranajit Guha concluded that "it is not possible to make sense of the experience of insurgency merely as a history of events without a subject" (quoted in Spivak 1988, 20).

Though I have presented and published Esperanza's testimony in abbreviated form, I have sought to maintain the integrity of her story, which is one of personal agency in which "the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than representative) of a collective memory and identity" (Yúdice 1996, 44) and in which Esperanza wished to participate and reassert her agency by engaging in the testimonial narration as a "process of self-constitution and survival" (46). Like subaltern studies, as George Yudice has observed:

Testimonial writing shares several features with what is currently called postmodernity: the rejection of master discourses or prevailing frameworks of interpreting the world and the increasing importance of the marginal. (49)

## TESTIMONY AND TRUTH

In *Masacres de la Selva* (Massacres in the jungle), Guatemalan anthropologist and priest Ricardo Falla provides extraordinary documentation about the massacres of more than seven hundred individuals in Ixcán and, in addition to providing a list of the names of these victims, tells the story through abbreviated testimonies of survivors. Falla's book was first published in Spanish in 1992, shortly after I had concluded an eight-month testimony project with Mateo, a survivor of the Ixcán massacres (Sanford 1993). In his book, Falla documents two stories of survival that are particularly pertinent to debates about testimony and truth because Mateo spoke of these same survivors in taped sessions months before Falla's book was published.

Falla's witness remembers:

An eight-year-old girl survived because they tied a rope around her neck and tightened it, "they saw the tongue coming out of the girl and thought she was dead." An old man of seventy-five was cut in the neck by the soldiers and he also lived because "the knife got stuck on a button in his shirt and the soldiers thought they had hit the bone and there was blood, so they kicked him and left him for dead." A couple and

their baby girl also survived. They threw themselves into the river from a bridge. "She was carrying the one-and-one-half-year-old baby and the woman was hit by a bullet from the bridge, but she did not die, neither did her baby. God is great," says the witness because these five survived. (57)

Mateo remembered how the story was recounted to his family by survivors:

The army arrived at another center very close to our village. The people were at church praying. The soldiers surrounded the church, doused it with gas and burned it with the people inside. Other families were also burned because the church was built with cardboard and palms and close to some other little palm houses. So, those houses caught fire and burned as well. There were about ten other families and the army captured them and put them in a line.

My father's *compadre* and *comadre*<sup>15</sup> were in this line. One by one, the army would grab each person in line, beat them and ask them questions. The soldiers beat the *campesinos* and killed them. But my father's *compadre* was old. They tied him up and they stabbed him three times in the neck and cut him in other places, too. But, because he was old, his skin didn't break enough. First the soldiers were mad because he didn't die. Then, when he looked bad, they said, "He is dead now." Then they threw him in a hole where he stayed.

Next the soldiers took his daughter and they tortured her with a rope. They put a rope around her neck and pulled the ends of the rope until they thought she was dead. Then, they threw her in the same hole. They told us later that the army left them for dead.

Behind them, there were other friends waiting their turn [to be killed]. He was very religious and was with his wife and their baby girl—maybe she was one year old. The baby was crying. The father said, "Why don't we pray? Let's give ourselves to God because our time has arrived. Only a few more people and it is our turn and they will kill us." The soldiers were shouting, "This is what we are going to do to everyone!" They were killing people and chopping them up. They cut them up with machetes and they tortured them and they raped the women.

So the man and woman gave themselves to God and as they were praying an idea occurred to them. They were very close to the river which was running high because it was winter. The man said to the woman, "Let's leave. We will try to escape and if they kill us, it is worth it because we will die from bullets. Because if they kill us like they are killing the other people, we are going to suffer a lot. We have seen how they are dying. They are going to kill us just like them."

They decided to escape and cross the river. Even if they drowned in the river, they would still suffer less. So, they gave themselves to God because they had great faith. They had faith. He grabbed his wife's hand and they ran. When they reached the river, the army was firing at them. But as the family reached the water's edge, the river lowered its water and the family passed to freedom. When they reached the other side of the river, the water rose again.

The soldiers were chasing them, trying to catch them and firing bullets. When the water rose again, it drowned some soldiers. But the family was safe on the other side. It was a miracle of God because no one else can do that [raise and lower a river]. They came to our house at six in the morning because they were like family to us. The old man came with his daughter too because he was my father's compadre. (Sanford 1993, 72–73)

While Falla's witness corroborates Mateo's account, together Falla's witness and Mateo raise a number of issues significant to debates about testimony and truth. First and foremost is that only the four adult survivors know what really happened because they are the only witnesses to the massacre other than the equally anonymous soldiers who committed the atrocities. Second, everyone tries to make sense of terror and survival in their own way within their own cosmology. Falla's witness believes the old man survived because a button protected him, while Mateo believes it was the old man's weathered leathery skin that stopped the knife's fatal blow. Massacres are not neat enterprises. Perhaps it was a button or thick skin, maybe it was simply the disorder of an assembly-line massacre, or maybe one of the soldiers looked the other way allowing someone he knew the opportunity to escape—as has been recounted to me by survivors in other communities.

Both Falla's witness and Mateo attribute the survival of these five people to the grace of God. To not die in the unbridled terror of a village massacre was so incomprehensible to both Mateo and Falla's witness that both had to use divine intervention as an explanation for the extraordinary phenomenon of survival. In the final analysis, the literary beauty, cosmological symbolism, and possible doubt raised by the river parting in Mateo's account are almost insignificant in the face of a horror so great that mere survival becomes a miraculous feat. As Rosemary Jane Jolly cautions in her work on narration and violence in South Africa:

Is it easier, and more comfortable, for us to use our analytical expertise to attack representations of the war, than to use them in a discussion of the incredibly complex, conflicting claims and suspect motivations that generated the tragedy itself? Surely it is necessary to forge ahead, our understandable apprehension notwithstanding? Doubtless, postmodernism has forced us to distinguish once again between the subject and its representation. But to distinguish between violations and various conceptions of those violations articulated through representation does not—and must not—mean that we should ignore the link between the two. (1996, xiii)

Michael Taussig has noted that the fastidious historian might take apart these types of stories, stripping away their fragments to “winnow out the truth from distortion, reality from illusion, fact from fiction.” He acknowledges that this creates a whole new field for “tabulating, typologizing and cross-checking,” but he asks, “What truth is it that is assumed and reproduced by such procedures?” He answers that it is a truth raised by the history of terror and atrocity “wherein the intimate codependence of truth on illusion and myth on reality” is the very substance of the “metabolism of power.” He concludes:

To cross-check truth in this field is necessary and necessarily Sisyphean, ratifying an illusory objectivity, a power-prone objectivity which in authorizing the split between truth and fiction secures power’s fabulous reach. Alternatively, we can listen to these stories neither as fiction nor as disguised signs of truth, but as real. (1987, 75)

## TIME AND THE QUANTIFICATION OF GENOCIDE

The 1997 exhumation of the clandestine cemetery of plaza massacre victims recovered the remains of thirty-five people. This number was significantly lower than had been expected by the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation and the Commission for Historical Clarification (also commonly referred to as the Truth Commission). Indeed, as we began the exhumation, popular knowledge of the Panzós massacre placed the toll between one hundred to two hundred victims.

In our forensic investigation, the collection of survivor testimonies revealed numerous deaths and disappearances following the actual massacre that provided a lens to community understanding of the massacre as a part of a continuum of violence experienced by the community, rather than the violence of the massacre expressed as a discrete incident. Moreover, research in the Panzós municipal archives corroborated survivor and widow testimonies of deaths following the massacre. Alessandro Portelli's "grammar of time" sheds light on the survivors' understanding of their lived experience of violence. Portelli writes, "Time is a continuum; placing an event in time requires that the continuum be broken down and made discrete" (1991, 69). No doubt, choices made in the breaking down of moments on the continuum into discrete events reflects cultural cosmologies. Still, one wonders about the source and propagation of the widely held belief of popular organizations, academics, and others that more than one hundred were killed in the Panzós massacre.

In my review of fifty-five paid advertisements placed in the Guatemala newspaper *El Gráfico* in 1978 by various popular organizations, a June 18 full-page ad provided a list of sixty-eight named victims of the Panzós massacre. I have cross-checked the names in this ad with the names of victims listed in reports prepared by the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG), which named twenty-five of the thirty-five skeletons exhumed; the Archbishop's Human Rights Office *Nunca Más* Report (ODHA 1998), which named eight of the massacre victims; and the Truth Commission's *Memory of Silence* Report (CEH 1999a), which named fifty-three victims; as well as my own research based on some two hundred survivor testimonies, which named thirty-five massacre victims. Portelli's "grammar of time" is also important to consider in reviewing these varying numbers because he draws attention to the often overlooked variable of the timing of the researcher: the moment in the life of the subject's history in which the researcher makes his or her entrance. This issue of timing can also be extended from the life cycles of individuals to the life cycles of communities.

First, there were thirty-five skeletons in the mass grave of victims—no more, no less. Because the forensic team names are based on positive scientific identification including probable identification



of twenty-three victims based on antemortem interviews in tandem and two positive identifications based on antemortem interviews and laboratory testing of skeletal remains, twenty-five skeletons were identified. The possibility of DNA testing was eliminated because all the skeletons displayed an advanced stage of decomposition due to the high acidity level of the soil. Insufficient scientific data prohibited the identification of the remaining ten skeletons as well as the confirmation of the additional ten names I had collected through testimonies.

The Archbishop's *Nunca Más* report, also known as the REHMI report, most clearly raises the variable of timing of the research, as well as access to survivors and witnesses. When the REHMI project began its far-reaching investigation utilizing the infrastructure of the Catholic Church in municipalities throughout the country, many survivors and witnesses still feared coming forward and many local REHMI investigators had to be extremely cautious about their own security as well as that of their witnesses. Unlike our forensic investigation in Panzós, REHMI investigators were not able to hold large public gatherings on a daily basis for three months while conducting their research. Nor did they have the benefit of the frequent visits by the prosecutor, United Nations and Truth Commission representatives, the Human Rights Ombudsman, national and international press, and human rights observers. No doubt, the forensic team's access to survivors and witnesses was greatly increased by the presence and support of all these individuals and organizations. Indeed, their presence, and our access to local survivors and witnesses, was largely the result of previous investigative work conducted in the area and support given to community members by REHMI and also by the UN Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA). The willingness of witnesses and survivors to come forward was also increased by the signing of the peace accords, the demobilization of civil patrols, and the reinsertion of the guerrillas into civil society—each of which took place prior to our arrival in Panzós. Whereas we were able to collect two hundred testimonies in our forensic investigation, the REHMI report, which named eight victims, was based on only four testimonies (ODHA 1998, 69).

Because the CEH report was written after the Commission received our forensic report on the exhumation, the Commission list

of fifty-three named victims is extremely interesting. In its final report, the Commission noted that the forensic report revealed thirty-five skeletons in the mass grave. The CEH investigation, however, in addition to the thirty-five victims in the grave, included those who were injured in the plaza and died after fleeing the massacre, those who drowned in the river fleeing, and those who were executed by security forces shortly thereafter. Thus, the Commission concluded that “the Guatemalan army arbitrarily executed 53 people and attempted to kill another 47 who were injured in the plaza massacre” resulting in “a grave violation of the right to life” (1999, 21). The CEH’s methodology, which was legally based in international human rights law and the collection of legal evidence of human rights violations, encompassed violations occurring in the actual massacre as well as those occurring shortly thereafter that could be tied to the violence meted out by the army in the plaza and in the days immediately following.

While the REHMI report was impacted by timing and access to witnesses and survivors, the forensic report was limited by the parameters of forensic science that define what is and what is not considered to be scientific evidence. The CEH’s timing and legal methodology allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of the violence experienced in the Panzós massacre than the forensic or REHMI reports. The 1978 popular organization’s ad naming sixty-eight victims was based on whatever information was provided by the witnesses and survivors to whom they had access in the nineteen days following the massacre.

A commonality in the production of the knowledge created by each of these organizations’ methodologies in compiling a list of victims was the grounding of each project, in varying degrees, in the collection of survivor testimony. And testimonies, as John Beverly has noted, are the narrated memories of real people “who continue living and acting in a real social history that also continues” (1996, 37). Both the testimony of the witness as well as the involvement of whoever listens to the testimony and produces it in written form are also part of that real and continuing social history in the making. In this sense, the lists of names can be understood as more than a naming of the victims of the massacre. They can also be understood as “the real and significant historical fact” beyond the names underscored by the

testimonies of survivors which is “memory itself” (Portelli 1991, 26), and this memory is one of genocide. The only certainty one can have in the study of genocide is that all we can learn and document from investigating these types of atrocities, regardless of our methodologies, is that the very destructive force that is the essence of genocide impedes our ability to ever fully document, know, or understand the totality of the devastation.

### TRUTH, REBURIAL, AND THE RESHAPING OF HISTORY

On May 28, 1998, twenty years after the Panzós massacre, I had the privilege of accompanying the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation to return the boxed skeletal remains of the victims to their wives, mothers, fathers, daughters, sons, and grandchildren. This concluded the investigation we began in July of 1997 for the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission to document the Guatemalan army massacre of Q’eqchi’ Maya peasants in the plaza of Panzós.

It was a long, hot ride to Panzós because the rains were unusually late, thus making the roads extremely dusty. The sky was hazy from the floating ash of a recent volcanic eruption as well as the expansive fires raging out of control in the nearby Peten. Add to this the seasonal slash-and-burn farming technique still favored by most farmers of maize, and you get visibility of less than 100 meters due to the density of smoke. The mountains of Coban and the hills of the lowlands were hidden behind a thick haze. Chunks of ash lightly gliding through the air left marks of soot in the hands 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 that left a cloud of white dust leaving everyone and everything looking as if they had been dipped in flour.

As we wound around the bend that passes 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 four hundred people were waiting by the cemetery near the entrance to Panzós. As we got out of the trucks, widows I had

interviewed nine months earlier laughed and shouted. They greeted and embraced each of us. Many smiled as tears ran down their faces.

Before we could take the bones to the municipal center to place them 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 costumbre* until the sky opened in a heavy downpour. We all ran the half mile down the road to the church, the women running with the boxes on their heads.

When we reached the church, the women had placed the thirty-eight boxes at the altar. It did not seem to matter that the speakers were almost completely blocked out of sight by the boxes. Everyone was wringing the rain out of their skirts and shirts. Most everyone was smiling—even those with tears running down their faces. There was a collective sense of victory. These monolingual Q'eqchi' women had successfully stood up to those who threatened them, to those who killed their husbands, sons, fathers, and brothers. Several different Q'eqchi' men stood at the podium speaking in Q'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 on the altar of the church.

Just as I was wondering if any of the widows would have an opportunity to speak, María, Mamá Maquín's granddaughter, approached the podium.

María nervously looked down at the podium. Lifting her head, looking out across the crowd filling the church, she said, "I am not afraid. I am not ashamed. I am not embarrassed." All the widows stopped talking and focused their attention on her. All the scattered conversations in the church stopped. And the church fell silent except for her words and the slapping of water upon the roof and ground outside. A bilingual health worker approached me. "This is important," she said, and she began to translate María's words from Q'eqchi' to Spanish.

"I cannot tell lies because I saw what happened and so did a lot of other people. That is why there are so many widows and orphans here," she affirmed in a quiet voice and the widows in the pews looked at one another nodding in agreement.

The widows began to rock their whole bodies in agreement with María's words; her cadence became rhythmic, near hypnotic. "I thank God for giving me life. Our mothers and fathers did everything possible to try to make a better life for us. The blood that ran in the streets ran for God, too."

For a moment, she paused to gather her thoughts, to gain her composure. In this moment, everyone in the church looked toward the altar, waiting in a hush for her to continue. "We are very poor," she said. "Because of our ignorance, they took advantage of us. They did not think we have the same God. They paid no attention to the harm they caused us as they stole our lands. To them, we were nothing more than animals. That day in the plaza, I realized this. They chased after me, they tried to kill me."

When she says, "They tried to kill me," she begins to shake. She begins to cry. As she wipes the tears from her cheeks with her bare hands again and again, she continues to speak. I glance at the widows who continue to rock. Many of them are now crying, reaching out to one another. María speaks louder and with greater force. She is still crying, but no longer shaking. She says, "I had to throw myself in the river. I lost my shoes. The current carried me down. I hit myself on rocks. When I finally got out of the river, I was covered in mud and full of thorns." María shakes her head at the implausibility of the truth and says, "But this happened to everyone. The army and the finqueros did this. But we are still alive." The widows look at one another nodding in agreement and repeating her words, "We are still alive."

Through irregular breaths of sorrow, she says, "They thought that they would always be able to treat us like animals, that we would never know how to defend ourselves. But, we also have rights. We have rights from the same laws that they have rights. We have the same rights.

"I decided to speak tonight because I was in the plaza the day of the massacre. Today I am giving my testimony in public. We have to tell everything that happened to us in the past so that we won't have fear in the future." All the widows are attentively listening. They continue to nod in agreement to the rhythm of her words.

María is no longer crying. She stands before her community at the altar of the church. She takes a deep breath and declares in a loud voice that fills the church, "I am still in pain. I have such sorrow. I lost

my mother, my father, my grandmother and I was only twelve. The people who did this to us, they live here with their families in tranquillity. That is why I say tonight," and then she states firmly and loudly, "I AM NOT AFRAID."

Tranquillity seems to replace the pained look on her face. She almost smiles 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 and I thank the forenses," she says and all the widows make eye contact with each of us and smile. "We are in total agreement that the truth be known. We don't want to suffer like in the past. We don't want problems. If we can talk about the past and all the bad things that happened, then we can say never again." The entire crowd seems to vibrate in agreement. Everyone is looking at one another and nodding in agreement.

In this moment, she has the entire crowd mesmerized and waiting for her words. María is filled with the energy the crowd has returned to her. She concludes, "I love God, 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 Embraces*, Eduardo Galeano notes that the root of *recordar*, to remember, is from the Latin *re-cordis*, which means "to pass back through the heart." The public remembering of María Maquín, 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.

## APPROPRIATION, AGENCY, AND THE ACCRETION OF TRUTH

While "official" histories may be used to justify and maintain military regimes or the authoritarian tendencies of civilian governments, history can also become a tool for the empowerment of the hitherto powerless (Rappaport 1990, 18). Much has been written in testimonial, subaltern, and anthropological literature about the dynamics of representation and appropriation in the relationship between those who give testimony and those who write it. John Beverly suggests that

while we should be watchful of “the idea of literary transculturation of the colonial and postcolonial subaltern from above,” we must also consider and “admit to the possibility of transculturation from below” (Beverly 1996, 272–73). In the case of *I, Rigoberta*, he suggests we should “worry less about how we appropriate Menchú” and rather seek “to understand and appreciate how she appropriates us for her purposes” (273). Building on Beverly’s suggestions regarding literary transculturation, I suggest we consider Maya appropriation and enactment of external political discourse and action to understand contemporary Maya political activism. At the Panzós church, the night before the reburial of the exhumed remains of massacre victims, María Maquín said, “If we can talk about the past and all the bad things that happened, then we can say, ‘Nunca Más.’” Was María using her own words, was it the discourse of outsiders or human rights discourse, or was someone else talking through her as several anthropologists have suggested to me? Or was her discourse and her political action of speaking publicly an instance of Beverly’s “transculturation from below” and an appropriation of global discourse for local purposes? Was María, as Beverly suggested of Rigoberta Menchú, “appropriat[ing] us for her purposes”?

Unless we go beyond the “safe, exclusive” theorizing and “condemnation of certain *representations* of violence,” Rosemary Jane Jolly argues that “we cannot identify how our present critical vocabulary contributes to a violent reality” (1996, xiv). One way to heed her concern is to seek an understanding of the content and meaning of the violence experienced by subalterns from their perspective. In my fieldwork, I have found that each testimony creates political space for another survivor to come forward to give her own testimony. Moreover, this giving of individual testimony represents an expansion of both potential and real individual agency that, in the collectivity of testimonies, creates new political space for local community action. Foucault argued that repression, in fact, “works through language and that the struggle to overturn repression includes speaking out against it. . . . Speaking out, not theorizing, constitutes a counterdiscourse, and it is produced by those involved ‘radically’ and ‘physically’ with existence” (quoted in Moussa and Scapp 1996, 93). Moreover, the very organization of speech and silences expressed in speaking out “reveal[s] the speakers’ relationships to their history”

(Portelli 1991, 50). Indeed, Maya political activism resonates with Francesca Polletta's research on the U.S. Civil Rights movement, which indicates that "the experience of 'standing up' [speaking], of demonstrating collective determination and resistance in the face of repression, may in fact be an instrumental benefit, a measure of movement success" and, furthermore, "the chance to 'stand up' against repression may be enough of a political opportunity to motivate collective action" (1999, 7).

In their testimonies, both public and private, Rigoberta Menchú, María Maquín, Esperanza, Mateo, and other massacre survivors shared "not just what people did, but what they thought they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think" (50). Dominick LaCapra has observed that "for memory to be effective at a collective level, it must reach larger numbers of people. Hence, the acts or works that convey it must be accessible" (1998, 139). Further, he identifies the witnessing of the giving of testimony as a "necessary condition of agency" (12). He explains:

It is altogether crucial as a way in which an intimidated or otherwise withdrawn victim of trauma may overcome being overwhelmed by numbness and passivity, reengage in social practice, and acquire a voice that may in certain conditions have practical effects (for example, in a court of law). But just as history should not be conflated with testimony, so agency should not simply be conflated with or limited to, witnessing. In order to change a state of affairs in a desirable manner, effective agency may have to go beyond witnessing to take up more comprehensive modes of political and social practice. (12)

In Panzós, these modes began with the community organizing and "standing up" to request an exhumation and ultimately succeeding not only in the exhumation, but also in the retaking of public spaces—the municipal plaza, the church, and the cemetery. As a community, survivors challenged these public spaces as mere reminders of Q'eqchi' loss and remade them into sites of popular memory contesting official stories. Further, these same survivors and widows seized the space they had created not only to publicly adjudicate collective memory, but also to move forward with legal proceedings against intellectual and material authors of the massacre and to seek resolution of the very land claims that had driven the Q'eqchi' to the



plaza on May 29, 1978. Thus, in Panzós as elsewhere in Guatemala, “emancipation would be a process rather than an end and women its agency rather than its beneficiaries” (Guha 1996, 10).

In its final report, the CEH concluded that the Panzós massacre was an illustrative case “of the undue influence exercised over the state apparatus by the agricultural sector to beneficially resolve land conflicts in their favor by involving the army in agricultural conflicts using violence against poor peasants.” Further, the local landowners “not only requested the presence of the army, but also favored the creation of a hostile environment against the peasant population” (1999b, 7, 22). Thus, more than twenty years after the massacre, the nationally and internationally supported CEH affirmed the 1978 claims of the Panzós survivors and popular organizations that the massacre was indeed the result of army intervention on behalf of local landowners. While the Panzós survivors lived in near total silence during the twenty years between the massacre and the investigation, the Panzós massacre as a metaphor for land rights and army repression was sustained in the popular imaginary. The investigations of the ODHA, the FAFG, and the CEH helped break the silence of Panzós, and the survivors seized the opportunity to define and seek local justice by appropriating the discourse of the peace process, which included “human rights discourse.” In so doing, Guha’s “small voice of history” got a hearing in the survivors’ account of the massacre “by interrupting the telling in the dominant version, breaking up its storyline and making a mess of its plot” (Guha 1996, 12).

## Notes

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1. Guha was referring to the women who participated in the Telangana movement (1946–1951) in India.

2. For more on the history of the *reinas indígenas*, see Gonzalez-Ponciano (1998).

3. The participation of women in protest is indeed a widespread, if insufficiently documented, phenomenon. On the key role of beauticians as community leaders during the civil rights movement, see Polletta (1999 and 2000); on women in the Sandinista revolution, see Randall (1981); on peasant women taking up arms in the Telangana uprising in India, see Kannibirán and Lalita (1990); on El Salvador, see Silber (1999) and Stephen (1994), among others.

4. Author's interview, September 1997.

5. Personal conversation with CEH and FAFG staff. At the request of the FAFG, I developed a research methodology and led the investigation for the historical reconstruction of massacres in Panzós, Alta Verapaz, and Acul, Nebaj, El Quiché. The methodology was then replicated in two additional investigations for the CEH in Chel, Chajul, El Quiché, and Belén, Sacatepequez. In May and June of 1998, I wrote the historical reconstruction of the massacres in Panzós and Acul, and supervised the writing of the reconstructions for Chel and Belén for the FAFG Report to the CEH.

6. I developed the six phases of terror based on twenty-three months of ethnographic and archival research and the collection of more than 350 testimonies in villages and municipalities in Guatemala.

7. Unclassified Department of State document memorandum, October 5, 1981, Reference No. 6366, 1-2.

8. Julio Roberto Alpírez, who was a paid agent of the CIA and ordered the assassination of U.S. citizen Michael Devine in 1990, trained at the School of the Americas at the same time as Lucas García. This training is not unusual. One would be hard-pressed to find a high-ranking official of the Guatemalan military who has not received training in the United States. General Hector Barrios, minister of defense (1996-1999) was trained at the School of the Americas as early as 1967 and as recently as 1987.

9. The number of massacre victims is based on Amnesty International Reports 1982, 1987; Americas Watch Reports 1984, 1986, 1990; Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation reports 1994-1998; REHMI report 1998. See also Shelton Davis and Julie Hodson's *Witness to Political Violence in Guatemala* (1982).

10. I presented this same analysis in *Latin American Perspectives* (1999) and in *Social Justice* (2000). Leigh Binford reiterated parts of this analysis in "Empowered Speech: Social Fields and the Limits of Testimony" at the Latin American Studies Association, Miami, March 2000.

11. Nairn's analysis of the U.S. role in developing paramilitary organizations throughout Central America is further confirmed by the following declassified CIA and State Department documents: United States Embassy in Guatemala memoranda to the Secretary of State on September 15, 1962; March 13, 1963; and January 23, 1964. See also memorandum of the Special Group, September 25, 1963; telegram from the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala to the State Department, January 5, 1966; Public Safety Division U.S. AID/Guatemala, "Operational Rescue of

Terrorist Kidnapping and Guatemala Police Activity to Counter," December 1965; CIA memoranda dated March and April 1966. All declassified documents cited in this article are now available from the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C.

12. *Indigenista* refers to scholars who have self-identified with and support so-called Fourth World Struggles.

13. Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (Guerrilla Army of the Poor).

14. Emphasis in original.

15. Literally, "compadre and comadre" mean "godfather and godmother." These godparents have a very honored role within the family. They may be godparents of a new house, crop, or car, though not necessarily a child.

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