

Archaeological Review from Cambridge

Volume 22.2 · November 2007



The Disturbing Past

Does your research give you nightmares?



Edited by James Holloway and Alison Klevnäs

Bridging the Emotional Gulf: Reflections on Excavation of Traumatic Memories

Victoria Sanford

Lehman College
City University of New York
vsanford@lehman.cuny.edu

I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering.

—J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Introduction

In the early 1990s, as an anthropology graduate student at Stanford University and a research consultant for the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, I took more than 400 testimonies from Maya survivors of massacres by the Guatemalan army. I continued to take testimonies as I completed *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (2003a) and *Violencia y Genocidio en Guatemala* (2003b). This field research formed part of an investigation into a campaign of genocide carried out against the Maya by the Guatemalan army in the early 1980s. In the broad stroke, my work shows the calculated and systematic way in which the Guatemalan army carried out three phases of genocide against the Maya which led to 626 known massacres and more than 200 000 dead or disappeared (CEH 1999). One key to this genocide

was the systematic incorporation of Maya men into Guatemalan army-controlled civil patrols (also known as PACs). For the majority rural Maya, participation in the PACs was required for personal and familial security and performed under duress. Even a 1990 U.S. State Department memo noted that “Credible reports say that those who refuse to serve in the civil patrols have suffered serious abuse, including death” (Jay 1990: 23). These PACs played a key role in local repression and massacres of neighbouring communities.

In its comprehensive investigation, the CEH (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico—Commission for Historical Clarification [Guatemalan truth commission]) found that 18% of human rights violations were committed by civil patrols. Further, it noted that 85% of those violations committed by patrollers were carried out under army orders (CEH 1999, v. 2: 226–227). The CEH found that one out of every ten human rights violations was carried out by a military commissioner and that while these commissioners often led patrollers in acts of violence, 87% of the violations committed by commissioners were in collusion with the army (CEH 1999, v. 2: 181).

In 1995, there were 2643 civil patrol units organized and led by the army. In August of 1996, when the demobilization of civil patrols was begun, there were some 270 906 mostly Maya peasants registered in civil patrols (CEH 1999, v. 2: 234). This is significantly less than the one million men who were organized into civil patrols in 1981. Taking into account the population at the time and adjusting for gender and excluding children and elderly, this means that in 1981, one out of every two adult men in Guatemala were militarized into the army-led civil patrols (CEH 1999, v. 2: 226–227).

One afternoon in 1994, I was talking with a group of indigenous men in one of the communities where I had worked for several years. They were talking about their different experiences in the army, PAC and guerrilla. I remember thinking to myself that every one of these men carried weapons in this war and most likely used them. The apparently simple life of small, rural villages is absolutely ruptured by the complexities of violence. Within communities, people know who did what, who gave up whom, who sacrificed someone else or even used the violence for

personal enrichment—these are Holocaust historian Daniel Goldhagen's (1996) "ordinary" citizens who become "willing executioners". I stopped myself from imagining my friends with weapons, receiving orders that could not be refused.

Several days later, I went to a *Maya costumbre* (religious practice) with my translator. Throughout the ritual music, dancing, and prayers of *costumbre*, there is a sharing of *kuxa*—an extremely high-alcohol-content, home-brewed beverage. As the cup is passed around from person to person, prior to taking a drink one offers a little *kuxa* to the heavens and a little *kuxa* to the earth. As we entered the celebration site, my translator pointed out a local K'iche man. He said, "Victoria, don't drink out of the cup if he hands it to you. He was a bad man during *La Violencia*¹ and I am certain that one day he will be poisoned at one of these *costumbres*. He has many enemies. That is why no one ever drinks out of the cup after him." And it was true, all the *kuxa* was always offered to the earth after he passed the cup.

The Rhythm of Memory

There is a certain rhythm to the giving of testimony. It usually begins with mundane, everyday occurrences. The survivor remembers the security of the daily-ness of life's routine before violence erupted unbidden in his or her life. If the witness (or researcher) is engaged and actively listening when the survivor tells the prelude to violence, the survivor slips into the tale of violence. While sometimes seemingly far away from the witness, the survivor is always checking back in with the witness—making eye contact or directly asking for affirmation of witnessing, "It was crazy, right? Do you see it made no sense? We didn't understand what was happening, who could?" The survivor then continues on the path of memory and recounts the profound pain and immeasurable indignities of survival without losing contact with the scholar witness or activist witness. In *Framer Framed*, Trinh Minh-ha (1992: 67) writes, "The witnesses go on living to bear witness to the unbearable". And yet, survivors seek out those who will bear witness to their torture, loss, and survival. As Elaine Scarry (1985: 50) notes, "acts that restore the voice become not only a denunciation of the pain but almost a diminution of the pain, a partial

reversal of the process of torture itself". The taking of testimony teaches one to listen and to listen carefully. And this careful listening draws survivors to give testimony.

What do I mean by *careful listening draws survivors to give testimony*? I have given more than 100 talks on my research in different academic and policy venues in the United States, Latin America, Europe, Japan, and South Africa. Whenever I have given a talk that is testimony-driven—heavily weighted by testimony, at the conclusion of the presentation I have been approached by an audience member who waits until I am alone. "I wonder if you have a minute? I want to tell you something that I think you will understand." Thus, without seeking them out, I have been given testimonies of survival from Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Colombia, South Africa, Pakistan, Sudan, Israel, Palestine, Chile, Ecuador, Argentina, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Nepal, among others. Significantly, the testimonies have often been from individuals who one might classify in human rights terms as both victims and victimizers. A Tamil Tiger from Sri Lanka, a former MK commander from South Africa, a former Israeli officer, a retired intelligence officer from Ecuador, a former member of a Guatemalan death squad. What does one do with these stories?

In my experience, careful listening also draws these survivor memories into one's own life toolbox or interpretive repertoire where they must be worked through if one hopes to sleep without dreamscapes textured by these memories. In her work on Argentina's Dirty War, Marguerite Feitlowitz (1998: 50) makes clear that "testimony fulfills the sacred obligation to bear witness, and however discomfiting it may be for us, our pain, though great, is minor compared with that of the victims". Still, sometimes, one no longer wants to hear. When I lived in Guatemala in 1996 and 1997 doing research on massacres, I used to flee from the villages because I felt I could not bear the weight of one more story. "Aren't you overwhelmed?" I asked Julia, my translator, after the 14th testimony on a particularly cold, damp day in Nebaj as I looked out at the line of survivors still waiting to give testimony near the exhumation of a clandestine cemetery. "Of course, Victoria," she responded. "But they want to talk and who else will listen?" And, even when I fled to the city, I never left alone. Because I had a vehicle, I would give rides to people wanting to travel

to Guatemala City. And because I lived in a spacious house with a partner who didn't mind if I filled it with my friends from the villages where I worked, I would also offer housing to my friends who ostensibly had some medical, legal or bureaucratic item to attend to in the capital. But they didn't travel to Guatemala City to take care of such business, they travelled to my house in the capital because they wanted to keep talking, to continue giving testimonies of survival. It was not unusual for people to take buses (more than 10 hours from Nebaj to Guatemala City at the time) to visit me in the capital in order to "add to my testimony because I remembered something else important".

I remember sitting at our dining room table in Guatemala City with my friend Magali as she recounted witnessing local officials participate in killing young men in the plaza of Nebaj. I was exhausted, physically and emotionally. We were having dinner. She was animated and speaking with great conviction. She stopped mid-sentence, "Victoria, where is your recorder? You need to write this down." We were close friends and I felt comfortable enough to say that I was tired. She told me not to worry and went upstairs to my office and brought me my recorder, some paper, and a pen. She set it all up. Then, she continued with her story. Every now and again, she would say, "I think you should write this point down" and, obediently, I would.

The Excavation of Memory

It was the archeological excavation of Acul massacre victims that brought massacre survivors from Acul and other villages to our exhumation site. They shared the desire to be heard. Throughout each day, the sounds of digging, sifting, and moving of dirt were accompanied by the hushed whispers of onlookers as remains were revealed, photographed, inventoried, and packed away for later lab analysis. Each phase of the archeological excavation became fused with local rituals and cultural practices. The wails and weeping of survivors advised us that some bit of clothing or an artifact of a loved one had been recognized as the earth was brushed away.

For the community, the cathartic lament of survivors, the ceremonial chants of the Maya priest, and the ritual burning of candles and incense

were as much a part of the exhumation as the physical excavation. For those of us on the forensic team, our role in the exhumation largely determined our perception of the country, including its geography. For example, each day as we made our way to the excavation site, the archaeologists digging up the graves would admire the crisp, blue river dotted with large white boulders nestled in a lush, green riverbank that cut through Acul. For those of us taking survivor testimonies, the river itself was a site of terror because it carried the memories of survivors who had recounted to us how the army used the river as a weapon to torture and kill, littering the riverbank with pain.

At the exhumation in Acul in 1997, men and women travelled long distances to join us because they heard we were listening to their stories. I first noticed Doña María as a new face approaching the Acul women with whom I had been working. They pointed in my direction, nodding to her and to me. She came straight over to me, crossed her arms decisively, shyly looked down at her feet, abruptly raised her head, looked me straight in the eye, and said, "I walked here to give my testimony of *La Violencia*. I am not from Acul. I do not have a relative in the grave, but what happened here happened in my village, too. It happened everywhere." I asked her why she came to Acul when many people were still afraid to speak. She told me that she had heard that there was a *gringa* listening to women. "I was a girl when it happened, but I am a woman now. I want to tell my story. Will you listen?"

Fear and Sorrow

Fear. People often ask me if I am afraid when I do my field research. The truth is complicated. Was I afraid in Guatemala? No, but I took Asha—a protection-trained German Shepherd—with me for my field research working alongside the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG). I first began working with the FAFG in Guatemala during the third exhumation in the country in 1994 before the peace accords were signed between the Guatemalan army and guerrillas, before the United Nations Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA) was started, before the demobilization of the civil patrols, before international NGOs were on the scene. The *forenses*, as locals referred to the forensic anthropologists conducting

exhumations of clandestine cemeteries of massacre victims, referred to Asha as my secret weapon because the *campesinos* (peasants) in rural villages would approach me with curiosity about this large and apparently docile creature. They would ask how I trained the coyote. I would explain that she is a German Shepherd, not a coyote, and that there are breeds of dogs, just as there are breeds of chickens. Inevitably, it would be collectively agreed in their Ixil, Achi, K'iche', or K'ekchi language that Asha is a coyote and that I don't know it because I am a *gringa*.² Maybe because I had the dog, I was never afraid. Or maybe I felt a bit safer and that at least with Asha I would have warning if someone approached in the night. Perhaps I was in denial. Or perhaps my fear was simply overwhelmed by other emotions. In Guatemala, more than fear, I felt sorrow. I lived in sorrow taking testimonies from survivors.

The Acul massacre was one of 79 massacres carried out in the department of El Quiché in 1981. These massacres and others like them were a part of the Guatemalan army's first campaign of genocide against the Maya.³ Describing the aftermath of the army massacre when fathers were forced to bury their massacred sons, Don Sebastián said, "It fills my heart with sorrow." He recounted, "Then [after the massacre], they asked us, 'What have you observed here? What is it that you have seen?' We did not answer them because we knew that they had killed our sons. We just didn't respond." The soldiers did. They said, "You don't answer us because you don't take good care of your sons. These sons of yours are involved with the guerrilla. That's why you don't answer us. Now, you've seen the dead. You have to return to your homes. You must go tranquil. Go home and eat, relax, and sleep. Don't do anything. You have done good work here. Go home. Go home tranquil."

Don Sebastián was sobbing, he nearly shouted, "But we are not tranquil. We are sad. We went home, but we didn't eat. We are crying. We are not content because we know what they have done. They have killed our sons. I couldn't eat for more than a month." He doubles over, burying his face in his hands between his knees. Still rocking his body, his sobs dwindle to whispers. I turn off my tape recorder. Without a word, Julia and I stand, then crouch, on either side of Don Sebastián. We half embrace him, half caress his back. I can feel each rib, each vertebra. He is

so thin. Powerlessly, I whisper, "Lo siento." (I am sorry.) Julia says, "No es justo. Sufrimos mucho. Todos sufrimos." (It is not just. We suffered a lot. We all suffered.) He lifts his head out of his hands. His hard, calloused hands pat our arms. He gains composure as he comforts us. "I am still not finished", he says, almost in apology. "There is still more. I want to tell more" (Sanford 2003a: 93–94).

In my writing, I struggle to come to terms with these kinds of experiences. In *Buried Secrets*, I wrote:

Indeed, in the frenetic escalation of painful memories, there is always more. It seems each time, when I thought we had reached the final ebb, when I felt overwhelmed with their memories of terror, when there just could not possibly be more horror that a human being could suffer and endure, these new friends who accepted me as their confidante would say, "There is more." For the outsider seeking to understand *La Violencia*, the trick is to assume nothing. One must accept the survivor as the guide through the labyrinth of terror. Embrace the path of the memory and allow the survivor to carry it to closure. Even if the path to closure is far beyond the untested limits of one's imagination (Sanford 2003a: 94).

Laurence Langer (1991) has written extensively about the relationship between the witness and the person giving testimony. His work studying Holocaust survivor testimonies on video revealed a number of interviewer/witnesses who sought to curtail testimony when it became discomfiting for the interviewer or failed to meet the interviewer's expectation of "heroic memory". Dominick LaCapra's (2001) work on witnessing, trauma, and history indicates that a type of transference takes place between the interviewer/witness and the survivor. He concludes that the form this transference takes has much to do with interpretation. LaCapra (2001: 78) also suggests that for the study of trauma, it is essential for the researcher to acknowledge this transference because failure to do so has

serious, and perhaps unintended, consequences in one's continued research and analysis.

Conclusion

In many ways, writing *Buried Secrets* was a meditation upon this transference. It is a meditation that continues as I take up new projects and expand upon previous projects in Guatemala while pursuing new, comparative projects in Colombia. As writing is always a temporal and provisional project, I sometimes think of new and different ways I would frame my own presence in *Buried Secrets*. If I were to write *Buried Secrets* now, here is how I would begin the book:

I came back from Guatemala with *susto*. What is *susto*, you ask. The direct translation is scare or fright. But *susto* is really something deeper and far more profound. It is a malady understood in Maya communities and pondered by anthropologists and those who study "folklore." But *susto* is real. People die from *susto*. For many Maya (and rural *ladinos*⁴ as well) to die from *susto* is to die from a reconfiguration of the individual body and soul, which cannot bear the weight of fear and sorrow in the physical and spiritual realms . . .

For me, the *susto* was physical and spiritual; it permeated my conscious and unconscious. Borrowing from Don Sebastian's testimony, my heart was filled with sorrow. Still, I did not have the kinds of nightmares or panic attacks one might imagine after taking these testimonies and working in the excavation to unearth the remains of the victims. Despite more than a decade, there is a dream that stands out – a kind of hallucinatory dreamscape.

The dream is in the little house where I stayed in the Achi-Maya pueblo of Rabinal. In my dream, I awoke in my room in that very house. I sat up on my floor mat and watched an older, indigenous woman in Achi Maya clothing silently move through the wall and cross my room in front of me, almost floating. She carried a large, heavy load on her back covered by a

deep red shawl. She looked straight ahead, oblivious to my presence. She said nothing. She passed through the wall on the other side of my room. Whether a dream or apparition, I returned to my slumber undisturbed. When I asked the local Maya priest for his interpretation of my dream, he listened to the details with great interest—especially that she carried a heavy load wrapped in red. He told me it meant that I must take the time I need to do my work carefully and that I had a big responsibility. Whether this was truly his interpretation of my dream or simply his view on my work, it only heightened the weight of the obligation I felt bearing down on me a bit more heavily with each testimony I took.

In western terms, one might locate this dream and the transference of these testimonies within a framework of secondary trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Following my field research, I struggled for two years to work the cumulative weight of the testimonies out of my body and soul. I think *susto* is a better description of the affect my field research had on me than trauma or PTSD. When I began my field research with the forensic team in Guatemala, I expected to be overwhelmed by the graves and the skeletal remains—the concrete evidence of atrocity unearthed by the excavation. Instead, I found the digging and brushing of the physical excavation of remains to be a peaceful and methodical process. Indeed, sometimes I would dream I was brushing the earth much in the way one can “feel” the waves of the ocean after spending the day swimming at the beach. But these were dreams of movement, not the content of the graves or their circumstances. Instead of the graves, it was the living memory of survivors that fought for space in my psyche, in my waking thoughts and dreamscapes. *Buried Secrets* was more than a dissertation, more than a book on human rights in Guatemala. On a most intimate level, it was a path for me to reconfigure the sorrow of my *susto* in a different realm. It was my therapy, my exit, my act of bearing witness, the fulfillment of my sacred obligation to those who entrusted me with their testimonies.

References

- CEH 1999. (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico), *Guatemala Memoria del Silencio*. Guatemala City: CEH.
- Feitlowitz, M. 1998. *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goldhagen, D. 1996. *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. New York: Knopf.
- Jay, A. 1990. *Persecution by Proxy: The Civil Patrols of Guatemala*. Washington DC: Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights.
- LaCapra, D. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Langer, L. 1991. *Holocaust Testimonies—The Ruins of Memory*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Sanford, V. 2003a. *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sanford, V. 2003b. *Violencia y Genocidio en Guatemala*. Guatemala City: F&G Editores.
- Scarry, E. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Remaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Trinh Minh-Ha. 1992. *Framer Framed*. New York: Routledge.

Notes

1. *La Violencia* is the term people use in Guatemala to refer to the time of the genocide.
2. The word "*gringo/a*" is used, often contemptuously, to refer to North Americans from the United States. It can also be used as a term of endearment or to connote innocence or inexperience with life in rural communities. Thus, it is used to explain why the *gringa* doesn't know she has a coyote, can't cross the river or scale the cliff very quickly, makes tortillas like a child, and can't wring water out of her jeans or towels when hand-washing in the river but can four-wheel drive.
3. For more on genocide in Guatemala, see *Buried Secrets* and *Violencia y Genocidio en Guatemala*.
4. *Ladino* is a term used to connote the non-Maya in Guatemala.