

## Breaking the Reign of Silence

### Ethnography of a Clandestine Cemetery

Perhaps all one can really hope for, all I am entitled to, is no more than this: to write it down. To report what I know. So that it will not be possible for any man ever to say again: I knew nothing about it.

ANDRÉ BRINK, *A DRY WHITE SEASON*

**B**etween the late 1970s and the late 1980s, Guatemala was torn by a time of mass terror and extreme violence in a genocidal campaign against the Maya that became known as “La Violencia.” In the end, some 626 villages were massacred by the army, 1.5 million people were displaced, and more than 200,000 civilians were dead or disappeared. More than 80 percent of the victims of this violence were Maya. This essay explores the joint efforts of Maya massacre survivors, forensic anthropologists, the Archbishop’s Office for Human Rights, and the Guatemalan truth commission to investigate the 1978 army massacre in Panzós. Just as the forensic investigation becomes a framework for revealing evidence of the massacre and of genocide, this ethnography—based on testimonies of survivors, interviews with perpetrators and archival research—provides an opportunity to understand its structure and context from the lived experiences of survivors. Indeed, as was the case in the massacre of Plan de Sánchez, survivor testimony provided both local context and understanding beyond the scientific findings of the exhumation. This local perspective is critical for understanding the contemporary transitional justice in which survivors live and seek to re-

build their lives and communities through local mobilizations for truth, justice, and human rights. The very act of giving testimony challenges the official silencing of the past, present, and future. Indeed, as Dominick La-Capra has noted: the mobilization of memory “relates acknowledgement and immanent critique to situational transcendence of the past that is not total but is nonetheless essential for opening up more desirable possibilities in the future” (1998: 16). Exhumations of clandestine cemeteries are the physical and symbolic representations of these contemporary Maya struggles for human rights, as well as their future possibilities (Sanford 2003). Thus in the Maya region of Guatemala, where human rights violations peaked at a horrific rate during La Violencia, indigenous people are currently mobilizing human rights discourse and practice as a mode of empowerment in their struggle to heal and to regain some control over their histories and their futures. John Beverly has pointed out that testimony “is first and foremost an act, a tactic by means of which people engage in the process of self-constitution and survival” (1996: 46). By participating in the exhumation of a clandestine cemetery and giving testimony, massacre survivors reassert their political agency by giving these testimonies for truth commission reports and court cases.

Initial newspaper articles reporting the May 29, 1978, Guatemalan army massacre of Q'eqchi' Maya peasants in the plaza of Panzós gave the official army count of thirty-four casualties. As survivors gave testimony in the capital and journalists were allowed into Panzós, some newspaper articles began to include peasant survivor estimates of more than one hundred dead. Following the June 8, 1978, march commemorating the assassination of Mario López Larrave and protesting the massacre in Panzós, popular organizations and others in the democratic opposition challenged official estimates and asserted that the death toll exceeded a hundred. Between 1978 and 1997, popular, academic, and press accounts of the massacre cited one to two hundred victims (Williams 1994: 148; Watanabe 1992: 250; Levenson-Estrada 1994: 142; Wilson 1995: 218; Aguilera Peralta 1981: 200; Montejo 1999: 40; Zur 1998: 69).<sup>1</sup> By the time the *Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala* (Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, FAFG) prepared for its survey visit to Panzós in July 1997, popular knowledge of the massacre numbered the victims as at least two hundred.<sup>2</sup>

Nineteen years after the massacre, the FAFG and the regional prosecutor from the departmental capital of Coban and his assistant traveled to Panzós

to carry out a preliminary site visit to gather information for the forensic investigation and the legal proceedings planned by the prosecutor. We were accompanied by two representatives of the Misión de Naciones Unidas para Guatemala (UN Verification Mission in Guatemala, MINUGUA) and five members of the Fuerzas de Respuesta Inmediata (Immediate Response Forces, FRI). The FRI were clad in their heavy black cotton uniforms with black wool berets—clothing better suited for the cool highlands than the hot, humid lowlands. These young Ladino men from Zacapa and Jutiapa each carried a machine gun, pistol, and other light weapons. The prosecutor had requested FRI presence because of death threats he had received from legal representatives of local plantation owners as he proceeded in a recent case in the murder of a teacher implicating the sons of Flavio Monzon—one of these same owners—in the 1978 massacre.

When we reached Panzós, more than two hundred widows ranging in age from thirty-five to seventy were waiting for us at the entrance to the cemetery. On arrival, we immediately explained that the FRI were with us to help the prosecutor and that no one should be afraid of them. We walked with the mostly older and elderly men and women, the prosecutor, the MINUGUA representatives, and the five FRI up to the site of the mass grave on a hill overlooking the municipal cemetery near the western entrance to Panzós. Initial apprehension of the FRI dissipated, and the widows seemed satisfied that so many “powerful” people were helping them in the exhumation. Accompanying the group of widows were adults and adolescents orphaned in La Violencia, as well as several elderly men who had lost their sons during the violence. The median age was probably about sixty. There was one thirty-five-year-old widow—she had been fifteen and pregnant when her husband was killed in the plaza massacre. Conspicuously absent were forty-five- to sixty-year-old men. They were absent for the same reason that forty-five- to sixty-year-old women and sixty- to eighty-year-old men and women were present: their husbands and sons accounted for the majority of victims of La Violencia. These missing men were the victims of the plaza massacre and the wave of disappearances and assassinations that followed.

At the top of the hill, a whitewashed cross made of railroad ties marked the grave of the massacre victims. Almost immediately, the two hundred widows began to give testimony about the day of the massacre and collectively wept. Though our organizational goal for the day was to locate

the grave site and gather basic information about the circumstances of the massacre rather than collect individual testimony, we listened as each widow spoke. We tried to comfort the men and women who sobbed as they recounted surviving the massacre and witnessing army soldiers killing their sons and husbands.

One young woman spoke firmly and wept as she recounted her survival and how, at the age of twelve, she had witnessed the killing of her grandmother, Mama Maquín, in the plaza. "I saw people dying there," María declared. "They were falling. There were some who fell on top of me and bullets flew by my face. I threw myself on the ground. I was face down and pretended to be dead. And there I was mixed in with those who had stopped moving."<sup>3</sup>

Everyone began to step forward wanting to give testimony about the massacre. We explained to the group that we would carefully listen to each of them when we returned to carry out the exhumation because we knew they had much to share with us and that it would require many days to take all the testimonies. We reaffirmed their right to speak and their need to be heard. En masse, we then went to a small, dark community building to explain the exhumation process and to answer any questions the witnesses and survivors might have about the process. Because few in the group spoke Spanish, our entire presentation was conducted through interpreters. We showed a slide presentation of exhumations in other parts of Guatemala that outlined the archaeological and logistical procedures and prepared survivors for what they would witness. Everyone listened with hushed attention. The sense of anticipation grew within the room. At the end of the presentation, rather than asking questions, several dozen people (mostly the elderly mothers and fathers) stood up holding the identification papers of their dead and disappeared loved ones and expressed their desire to begin the identification process right then and there.

Once again, we explained that we would collect the information from each of them when we returned to do the exhumation. When we left, we felt extremely satisfied with the meeting and the level of community participation. More than two hundred widows had come to the meeting, thus reaffirming the reported two hundred killed in the massacre. We believed the grave site was larger than community members indicated to us because the site they outlined was too small to hold so many people. Later that same day in Coban, we met with a religious worker who had been in Panzós the day

after the massacre and who had worked there for several years. She smiled on hearing that two hundred widows had gathered to take us to the grave site and to participate in our meeting. She said, "Until recently violence and silence reigned in Panzós."<sup>4</sup>

### **Testimony and the Excavation of Memory**

On our return to Panzós to begin the exhumation, in September of 1997, the same widows were waiting for us. Two translators accompanied us. We set up two private corners within a nearby house where we would conduct interviews. The house sat on a little hill above the cemetery. A thatched roof rested on the walls of wood slabs and bamboolike sticks. The dirt floor was swept clean. The sparse furnishings gave the room a spacious feeling. In one corner was a bed of plywood slats. A hammock hung diagonally across the room. Against the wall facing the door was a small table covered with a piece of floral plastic. Candles, a few flowers in a cola bottle, an image of a saint, and old tin cans blackened by smoke from incense transformed the humble table into an altar. A plain wood slab table and bench became our workspace. We moved the table from the center of the room to the empty corners. Only when the rays of the afternoon sun beat down on us through the bamboo wall did we understand why this side of the room was empty—the heat was more intense where we were working inside the dark house than it was in the direct midday sun outside.

Before beginning our work at the site, and before taking survivor testimonies, we went to the municipal offices on the plaza to meet with the mayor. I asked for the death registers from 1978 and reviewed them with another team member. The registers revealed that on May 29, 1978, Edelberto Asig (police chief then and now) and then mayor Walter Overdick recorded twenty-four deaths with the letters xxx in the spaces provided for the names of the deceased. The time of death was recorded as 9:00 a.m. and the word *balas* (bullets) filled the space for the cause of death (*Registro de Defunciones de Panzós*, 24). We wondered where the other 175 entries were and what had prevented the mayor and police chief from recording the other deaths in the plaza massacre. We noted data about deaths before, during, and after May of 1978.

That same morning when we returned to the humble house near the graveyard where we were to conduct our interviews, I began the day by outlining the interview process in the same way that each individual inter-

view is outlined prior to taping. Through my interpreter, I assured those present that interviews would be private, not public, and that all interview data would be held confidential between the FAEG and the person interviewed. The women nodded in agreement with me and with one another. I explained that we would use the information from the interviews for our report to the Comisión de Clarificación Histórico (Historical Clarification Commission, CEH), but that we would not use their individual names. I also explained that others including myself would most likely use this information to write books and articles about Panzós, but that people's identities would remain anonymous. In individual interviews, from this first day on, the majority of Panzós survivors established their own authority and individual political rights by asserting that they wanted their names used. Men and women would say, "What more can happen to me? They killed my son [or husband]. I have nothing. We want justice. Write my name down."

Although I have used the Widow Cus and María Maquin's real names, there are numerous others whose names I have replaced with pseudonyms despite their requests to the contrary. While the home of the Widow Cus was the public gathering place during the excavation and María Maquin has been featured in national and international news stories following the reburial of the remains, the other individuals are not publicly known figures. Their testimonies have been given in private and often clandestinely. Public knowledge of their testimonies could put these individuals and their families at further risk.

The giving of testimony is an emotionally charged experience. When individuals say, "I have nothing to lose. Write my name down," they are asserting a position of defiance in the present to the pain of the past. Rather than debate the potential risks of using real names (which are in themselves acknowledged by the words "I have nothing left to lose"), I suggest we discuss it later. Sometimes, we talk about it at the end of the interview. Usually, we discuss it within a few days when they seek me out to tell me they have decided they would prefer not to use their real names. More often than not, they have second thoughts about using their real names and express fear of potential harm, not to themselves, but to relatives or neighbors. As I always ask those I interview if they have a name they would prefer for me to use in place of their own, they put great effort into choosing a

pseudonym that holds personal meaning for them—many times, it is the name of a relative or friend who died in La Violencia. In the case of those few who asked me to use their real name with whom I had no later contact, I have chosen to err on the side of safety and use a pseudonym.

Finally, although the majority of survivors with whom I have spoken have sooner or later chosen anonymity, not once has a single survivor asked me not to use their testimony. Indeed, when asking for anonymity, survivors emphasize that it is the story that has urgent need to be known. As Doña Juanita explained after changing her mind about the use of her name, “I am afraid of what might happen to my children if I use my name. But if you need my name to give faith to my testimony, I give you my permission” (Panzós Testimony No. 7, September 7, 1997). While survivors come forward and speak for many different reasons, many wish to unburden their pain, to share the content of their lived experience of violence, and to have their experiences validated by those who listen and the wider audience they hope their testimony will reach.

In the early afternoon of our first day of research in Panzós, we returned to the municipal archives with more FAEG team members to help us review and make note of pertinent data from all Panzós death registers from 1978 to 1985, as well as from other municipal records. On our return we were informed that the municipal employee responsible for these records (which we had perused that same morning) was on vacation and would not be returning until the end of October. We would be welcome to return to Panzós in October to review the documents. I requested a meeting with the mayor who directed me to the municipal secretary (who, like the police chief, El Canché Asig, is a permanent employee of the municipality). The municipal secretary glared at me and his face turned red with anger as I explained that the records we were requesting were public documents to which everyone had legal access, regardless of employee vacations. Having asserted the law yet seeking to avoid a confrontation with the secretary and the disappearance of the documents, I then thanked him for his collaboration and offered that it would be embarrassing for both of us if MINUGUA representatives had to come to look for the documents and that perhaps someone else in the municipal office might know where to find them—thereby avoiding embarrassment for both of us. He asked us to wait and said he would try to find someone to help us. Twenty minutes later we were

given the same documents we had been viewing earlier that morning. In the *libro de actas* (book of minutes [of local municipal meetings]), the page containing the minutes for the first council meeting held after the massacre had been meticulously marked out with cursive circles in blue ink, completely covering all writing below.

Several FAEG team members stayed at the municipal offices to record data from the death registers and council meeting minutes. I returned to the little house above the graveyard with my research assistant, Leonor, and the translators, Miguel and María,<sup>5</sup> to take testimonies. For nearly three weeks, we interviewed daily from 7:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m., often without taking a break because there were so many people waiting to be interviewed. The number of survivors waiting to give testimony never seemed to diminish. People would arrive at seven in the morning and wait until three in the afternoon to give their testimony. Don Salvador waited with his sweat-stained hat in hand from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. to ensure that his testimony was heard. Each day, as the afternoon approached, I would look out to those waiting for their turn to speak and count more than forty men and women. They had left their work in the fields to wait all day to give their testimony. They would sit patiently in the heat, without food or drink, just waiting for their turn to speak.

Soon, Leonor, Miguel, María, and I were sharing our lunches with the people we were interviewing because we knew that no matter how tired we were, their need to speak was greater than our need to rest. In the end, we greatly counted on each other to make sure that all pertinent facts were covered in the taking of testimonies. The humidity was so great that our clothes were drenched. Our minds were numbed by the heat and the endless testimonies of violence. The skin on our faces became irritated from using tissue to wipe away the sweat. We perspired so much that we dripped onto our notebooks. We learned why the widows carried a hand towel with them. As we wiped the sweat from our faces and necks, fanned our bodies with our damp clothes, and shared cigarettes, Gatorade, and snacks with survivors, the formal relationships that divide researcher, research assistant, interpreter, and informant became blurred. Our days were spent taking testimonies in collective conversations in which we all shared the goal of trying to understand what had happened in Panzós.

In all we interviewed almost two hundred people in Panzós and several more in other parts of the country. The first day we interviewed eighteen people and discovered that most came to give testimony about dis-



appeared husbands, sons, brothers, or fathers, rather than about loved ones murdered in the plaza.

### **The Survivor Story: Ana, Juana, and Rosario**

Doña Ana holds her chin in her hands and looks off to a faraway place beyond the graveyard below: "We suffered so much. My God, how we suffered." She is recounting the violence that selectively destroyed the interdependence of Q'eqchi' families and communities, replacing a social fabric based on collaboration with one of betrayal and mistrust. "In the middle of the night Ladinos and Q'eqchi's came to our house. They were Q'eqchi's from here because they speak like we speak, but they had their faces covered. The Ladinos didn't cover their faces." Partially hidden by the darkness of the night, they quietly moved through the village until they reached the door to Doña Ana's humble home. With a swift kick and a slam of machine gun butts, the door gave way and loudly fell to the floor. Seeking to protect her husband, Doña Ana rose from bed and stood between the armed men and her husband. "They knocked me down on the ground," she says with sadness as she clutches her stomach and rocks forward. "They tied up my husband and kicked him and hit him with their guns." Doña Ana begins to cry as she recounts, "They took him away." Then she pauses for a moment and takes a deep breath. She shifts her gaze and looks directly into my eyes. She is strong. She is afraid. She declares quietly, but firmly, "El Canché was with them" (Panzós Testimony No. 3, September 6, 1997).

Wiping the sweat from her brow with a small hand towel, Doña Juana seats herself at the table. She has been waiting nearly eight hours to give her testimony. Her skin has a gray pallor, accompanied by the thick cough associated with tuberculosis. She immediately begins to speak, "My son was a catechist. He knew how to read. Now in the village, no one knows how to read. My son just disappeared." She is desperate. She is hopeful. "Do you know where he is?" she asks me. I am powerless and feel close to useless as I explain that we are exhuming the victims of the plaza massacre and that we do not know the fate or place of burial of the disappeared. "My son was in the plaza," she tells me. "My God, we have all suffered here" (Panzós Testimony No. 17, September 7, 1997).

In 1978, at fifty-five, Don Manuel was the eldest Maya priest in his village. He was a spiritual leader and a guide respected throughout Panzós. One year after the plaza massacre, he and his wife Doña Rosario were awakened in the middle of the night by the sound of a truck on the dirt road near their

home. "It was so dark and we couldn't find our flashlight. I heard my son yelling from his house, 'Oh my God! Papá!' because he could hear the soldiers surrounding our house."

Soldiers broke into the house of the Mayan priest and dragged him out of the house wrapped in the hammock in which he had been sleeping. "They were beating and kicking him with no mercy," remembers Doña Rosario. "That same night, the other priests disappeared too" (Panzós Testimony No. 10, September 7, 1997).

In most cases, Asig, the chief of police (popularly known as El Canché) was implicated in the disappearances. According to twelve testimonies, he participated in the kidnapping of the disappeared from their homes or had threatened them shortly before.<sup>6</sup>

As the days went by, our tabulation of victims based on testimony began to show a rapidly increasing number of disappeared and a slow increase in the number of victims of the plaza massacre. While the number of disappeared increased by twenty to thirty each day, the number of massacre victims increased by only three to six. Each day, an average of forty-three survivors and witnesses waited in the stifling heat for their turn to speak on the impact of the massacre on their lives. Many who had already given testimony returned with a relative *para apoyar* (to support) the widows, victims, and survivors. Often they returned ostensibly to share a new fact they had remembered. In most cases, more than wanting to provide new information, they simply wanted to keep talking. The silence had been broken. Many said, "Ya siento aliviada. Quiero aliviarme un poco más" (I feel relieved, I want to relieve myself a little more).

#### **"A Year of Death": Juanita, Feliciana, and Magdalena**

Doña Juanita shares her sadness as she fans herself from the heat, "My husband died in the plaza. I was thirty-five and had six children." She looks off into the distance and rubs her chest, "My baby died because I transmitted my sadness and fear in my milk." She glances toward the dirt floor, vaguely nods in agreement with herself, and declares, "The massacre in the plaza killed my husband and my baby." She raises her head to look at me. Tears fall down her face as she recounts her children's suffering. "Maltiox," she thanks me. As she stands, she squeezes my hand before she walks away (Panzós Testimony No. 7, September 7, 1997).

After Doña Juanita, three women and one man give their testimonies. Doña Felicianita is the eleventh interview on September 7, 1997. She stares at the ground as she sits down in the chair. She begins to cry even before she begins to speak. We try to comfort her, though it seems like an impossibility. I look over to the area where victims and survivors are waiting for their opportunity to give testimony: I count thirty-two people within my field of vision. Mixed in my interview notes, I find I have written, "How can we ever get through this line of people? What can we give them?"

As we gently pat Doña Felicianita's shoulder and back, offer her a soda and some Kleenex, she composes herself. She sits up erectly in the chair. She looks directly at the tape recorder and states, "My father died in the plaza. My husband survived, but not completely. He lost his arm from machine-gun fire. He can't work the land anymore. Ever since then, all he can do is work as a carrier. He carries one hundred pounds, and they pay him eighty centavos to one quetzal to carry it one to three kilometers" (Panzós Testimony No. 11, September 7, 1997).

Doña Magdalena's parents and brothers survived the plaza massacre. Her husband was not so fortunate. "I had ten children when my husband died in the plaza. But that year, many people died," she explains trying to give context to the incomprehensible by making ordinary the extraordinary. She pauses for a moment nodding her chin and rocking her body. Then she says almost matter-of-factly, "It was a year of death" (Panzós Testimony No. 16, September 7, 1997).

In a certain way, regardless of the memories that are shared, each survivor and each witness must suspend his or her own disbelief to believe that the outside listener, whether national or international, human rights worker or academic researcher, might actually be able to comprehend personal representations and memories of terror. Then, in the giving of testimony or in responding to interview questions, the witness seeks to consciously represent the memories of terror that dominate the unconscious and continue to shape daily encounters even absent the public acknowledgment of terror and its memory. As Jorge Luís Borges has noted, "Only one thing does not exist. It is forgetting" (qtd. in Benedetti 1995: 11).

On the third day of our investigation, we decided to interview those who came to give testimony about a relative killed in the plaza massacre before those who sought to testify of relatives sequestered, disappeared, and as-

sassinated following the massacre. We did this because the archaeologists carrying out the excavation of the mass grave needed the information we were gathering and because we were trying to estimate the number of individuals killed in the massacre. Thus we began to organize those who came to give testimony by placing those with a relative who had died in the plaza at the front of the line. Those who came to give testimonies of violence and loss following the massacre agreed to allow the others to go first as long as we promised we would take their testimonies. Each day, they patiently waited until there were no more plaza massacre testimonies so that they could give their own testimonies of survival. Plaza massacre survivors reaffirmed the right of others to give testimony, “Sufrimos igual. Aquí, todos sufrimos” (We suffered equally. Here, we all suffered).

### **Searching for Facts and Bearing Witness**

Despite the reorganization of the testimony-taking process, each day brought only a few plaza testimonies. Yet information about the day of the massacre remained consistent in both what was said and what was not said. While all books and articles written about the Panzós massacre reported Guatemalan army soldiers firing into a large group of peasants protesting for land in the plaza in front of the municipal offices, no one seemed to know who organized the protest, or if indeed there was a protest the day of the massacre. The reported number of people congregating in the plaza was widely inconsistent, ranging from 150 to 2,000.

The next issue that had initially seemed a nonissue became both a critical and an extremely delicate question. While news articles, books, and political propaganda documenting the Panzós massacre consistently outlined the army shooting on a peasant protest over land, this was not the story we were told. By the end of the first day, we no longer asked if the deceased had attended the protest in the plaza; rather we called it a meeting. The next day we referred to it as a reunion. As more people came each day, it became increasingly clear that they wanted to talk about their fear and their pain, which we of course wanted to hear (if only to bear witness), but we also needed facts for our report to the CEH. By the third day, as the FAFG archaeologists continued to prepare the site for the exhumation, I told the archaeologists that I did not believe two hundred people were killed in the massacre or buried in the grave. I estimated the number as low as twenty-five (based on the death register) and as high as sixty-five (somewhat randomly doubling the testimonies we had already taken), but no higher.

By this time, our composite account of the plaza massacre based on survivor and witness testimonies went something like this: Somewhere between two hundred and nine hundred men, women, and children (but mostly men and boys) marched to the plaza with machetes and *palos* (sticks) in their possession, and possibly waving them in the air. Witnesses and survivors reported the mood of the crowd as angry and happy, and therefore unclear. Due to contradictory testimonies, the crowd's intention was unclear as well. The people were organized by an unidentified group of local residents. They went to the plaza expecting to receive land. In fact, some witnesses and survivors reported that the mayor called the meeting promising land to all who arrived.

From the vantage point of investigating the massacre for the FAFG report to the CEH, it was from the flood of individual and community memories that we sought to establish a reasonable and verifiable reconstruction of the massacre by comparing and contrasting consistencies and contradictions within the testimonies and then seeking corroboration from other sources. This required a constant review of testimonies and a nightly dissection and comparison of key moments described by widows and survivors. While the actual excavation of skeletal remains provides material for forensic and archaeological, that is, scientific, analysis to determine facts such as the gender, age, and identity of the victims, as well as the cause of death and methods used to dispose of the remains, the historical reconstruction of the massacre relies on testimonies, interviews, and archival resources—each of which can rightly be described as being subjective and/or biased.

When presenting ethnographic material and sharing testimonies of massacre survivors in academic and policy venues, I have often been asked, "How do you know they are telling you the truth? How do you decide what is true?" While one might believe that these questions reflect the disbelief of the person asking, I have come to believe that these questions (like the popular usage of *¿Saber?*) more reflect a desire for an orderly and tangible world—a world that, if it ever existed, was turned upside down and made surreal by the obscenity of war. This is not particular to the Guatemalan genocide. Indeed, in his work on the Holocaust, the philosopher and survivor Bruno Bettelheim has written of how the truth of his first work on trauma and survival (1979) was doubted and the work itself was repeatedly rejected by peer-reviewed psychology journals as not scientific, not replicable, too emotional, not objective, and potentially offensive in its portrayal of the Nazis. Thus memories of survival seem both obscene and surreal to

those who have not either experienced or come close to it through its recounting by survivors. Conversely, those who have experienced and survived extreme state violence, regardless of place and time, often comment that the testimonies resonate with their own experiences of survival. In my own experience, Indonesians, South Africans, Rwandans, Israelis, Palestinians, Sri Lankans, Salvadorans, Argentines, and Chileans, among others, have often shared their own stories in public venues to contest those who have asked about the truth of the testimonies I have presented.

In his writing on the Vietnam War, Tim O'Brien offers, "You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let's say, and afterward you ask, 'Is it true?' and if the answer matters, you've got your answer" (1990: 89). This is not the glib response it may appear to be. He further explains: "In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. . . . It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe. . . . a true war story is never about war. . . . It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. . . . You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever" (83-91).

The following excerpts from seemingly never-ending testimonies were among those we used to reconstruct events preceding the massacre. They are indicative of the deluge of painful memories shared with us as widows and survivors sought to reconstruct their personal and community histories and, at the same time, communicate the experience and memory of these events to outsiders. It is from this deluge that enveloped us, as well as those giving testimonies, that we sought to dissect and disentangle "facts" and, at the same time, understand and respect the raw memories shared with us. The offering of these fragments is my modest attempt to share both the survivor memories and the challenge they present to the researcher in the field who, while overwhelmed by the sensation of their immediacy and sorrow, seeks to understand the lived experiences of survivors in such a way that this understanding might make sense to survivors, researchers, and readers.

### **Why the Peasants Went to the Plaza**

DOÑA JUANITA

*We were soliciting a little piece of land. For this they killed my husband.*  
(Panzós Testimony No. 7, September 7, 1997)

DOÑA FRANCISCA

*We had gone to make Mayejak [Maya ceremony] with the rest of the people. To do this ceremony, we were soliciting land for our children. We made Mayejak with the intention that we would be heard when we went to the plaza. We supplicated God that we would be heard when we reached the plaza. (Panzós Testimony No. 13, September 7, 1997)*

DOÑA ROSA

*My husband only wanted a small piece of land. He just wanted a little bit of land to grow our maize. He didn't have any problems. He had not done anything wrong. We lived in tranquility. He never thought something like this would happen to us. He never thought our children would be left orphans. (Panzós Testimony No. 2, September 7, 1997)*

DOÑA TOMASA

*My deceased husband came to the plaza for land. He was interested in getting a little bit of land. (Panzós Testimony No. 14, September 7, 1997)*

DOÑA JACINTA

*They came for the lands they had solicited. They had just finished a ceremony. They came with the hope that their needs would be met. They never thought they were coming to die. (Panzós Testimony No. 20, September 7, 1997)*

DOÑA SOLEDAD

*They made a ceremony. They asked for land. They received death. (Panzós Testimony No. 1, September 9, 1997)*

DOÑA JULIA

*My son died in the plaza. He was a member of the committee. They sent papers and requests for land. The mayor never responded, so they decided to go to the municipality because that is the maximum authority here. (Panzós Testimony No. 6, September 10, 1997)*

DOÑA ELENA

*In the morning, early in the morning, the mayor sent a message calling us to the plaza. (Panzós Testimony No. 1, September 20, 1997)*

DOÑA MANUELA

*The army did not want us to dialogue with the mayor. (Panzós Testimony No. 1, October 2, 1997)*

DOÑA JOSEFA

*A paper came from Guatemala City. The mayor was the one who received the paper. He knew that the people needed lands and so he called everyone, "Everyone who needs land should come." So there was a grand convocation. People arrived from everywhere. (Panzós Testimony No. 1, October 17, 1997)*

When the crowd arrived at the plaza around 8 a.m. they saw between twenty to sixty soldiers, most of them perched on the roofs of buildings surrounding the plaza. Trying to make sense of what happened, Doña Dominga cautiously posits, "Maybe they just got bored with us going to the municipality all the time. The mayor got bored with us." Then, with hands grasped tightly together as if to pray, she taps the table firmly and says, "They had this all planned because there were soldiers on the roofs of the municipality, the salon, and the church" (Panzós Testimony No. 6, October 9, 1997).

By this point in our investigation, all testimonies corroborated that those who had gone to the plaza had done so because they needed lands to cultivate their subsistence maize crops. It was also clear that prior to the gathering at the plaza, the participants had celebrated Mayajek in various communities. Perhaps if any of the Maya priests had survived La Violencia, we would have more complete details about the celebration of Mayajek and its relationship to the land organization. But all the Maya priests were killed. So we listened carefully to the representations of history and memory shared by their widows, and from this individual and collective intervention we reconstructed the massacre and the violence that followed.

### **The Plaza Massacre**

Based on survivor and witness testimony, as well as on municipal records, we knew that at 9:00 a.m. on May 29, 1978, there was a burst of gunfire into the crowd gathered in the Panzós plaza and that those who were not shot fled. Nobody disputed that the Guatemalan army opened fire onto a crowd



of civilians. Indeed, a striking consistency in the testimonies of and interviews with witnesses and former functionaries was that everyone claimed that the gunfire came from army soldiers and lasted for no more than a few minutes. Though contradictions arise in the testimonies concerning the minutes before, during, and after the massacre, these fragments, like the numerous testimonies from which they were drawn, represent a slow accretion of facts through the reconstruction of community history by way of individual memories and lived experiences.

### **Minutes That Marked Survivor Memories**

DON JACINTO

*When they knew that the people were soliciting a little piece of land, they didn't like it. They called the army. They gathered all the people together and asked, "Do you have our papers?" The man asked the question one more time and no one responded. After they had asked for these documents several times and no one responded, they opened fire. (Panzós Testimony No. 8, September 6, 1997)*

DOÑA JOSEFA

*I saw what happened there. The mayor, Don Walter, received a paper. It was the third time we were going to speak with him. He didn't like that he had received this paper. He extended his arm in the direction of the people on the plaza, and they opened fire on the people. Many people fell there. There in the plaza was a small tree, and I hid myself beneath this. Gunfire passed so close to me. (Panzós Testimony No. 1, October 17, 1997)*

DOÑA MANUELA

*A campesino tried to snatch a weapon, but didn't know how to use it. (Panzós Testimony No. 1, October 2, 1997)*

MARÍA MAQUÍN

*With just one burst of gunfire they killed the people. It was only just for a moment and everyone fell there. I was so surprised because we had only arrived just a few moments before. My grandmother was going to ask for a favor. She said she wanted to speak with the mayor. But they didn't respond well to her. They answered asking, "What do you want?" She just wanted to speak with him, ask him a favor. She wanted to ask for help, for a little bit of*

land. "For a little bit of land, that's what we came for," she said. They responded, "There are your lands, there in the cemetery." The soldiers were the ones who said this to her. So then my grandmother said nothing. That's when they opened fire at the count of three. One. Two. Three. They opened fire, and I was in shock as I watched the people die. (Panzós Testimony No. 2, September 6, 1997)

DOÑA MANUELA

The Señora Rosa Maquín [Mama Maquín] with her granddaughters was at the front on the steps of the municipal building. They fell to the ground, the little girls and the old woman. The bullets hit the old woman. It blew off the top of her skull. (Panzós Testimony No. 1, October 2, 1997)

DON JACINTO

Everyone was thrown down on the ground. Some were fleeing. They were injured. They were covered with blood. (Panzós Testimony No. 8, September 6, 1997)

DOÑA FELIPA

My mother-in-law died in the plaza. Only her sons reached the house. Then the injured arrived. Many arrived with fractured arms and legs [from machine-gun fire]. Many came to my house. (Panzós Testimony No. 3, September 7, 1997)

DOÑA FRANCISCA

My husband survived the massacre. He reached the house and said, "Something very painful has just happened. They have just killed the people in the plaza." (Panzós Testimony No. 13, September 7, 1997)

Those who survived the shooting and fled the plaza feared returning to their villages because army helicopters were following crowds of people. The majority of survivors fled to the river to hide. Some spent up to thirty-six hours in the water hiding from soldiers on the shore of the river. Survivor testimony and news articles written by journalists who visited Panzós following the massacre indicate that both the wave of civilian flight and the wave of army occupation and violence radiated throughout the area engulfing everyone.

## Conclusion: Time and the Quantification of Genocide

The 1997 exhumation of the clandestine cemetery of 1978 plaza massacre victims recovered the remains of thirty-five people.<sup>7</sup> This number was significantly lower than that expected by the FAFG and the CEH. Indeed, as we began the exhumation, popular opinion placed the death toll between one and two hundred victims (see Barnoya García 1984; Barry 1986; Black 1984; CEHIS 1979; Figueroa Ibarra 1991; Aguilera Peralta 1981). When dealing with an event such as a massacre, how do you define “victim”? While this might seem intuitively obvious, in fact there are a number of distinct ways of defining and counting victims, and the Panzós massacre offers an instructive example of how this process works.

In our forensic investigation, the collection of survivor testimonies revealed numerous deaths and disappearances following the actual massacre. These provided a lens into the community’s understanding of the massacre as part of a continuum of violence, rather than as a discrete incident. Moreover, research in the Panzós municipal archives corroborated survivor and widow testimonies of deaths following the massacre. The oral historian Alessandro Portelli’s “grammar of time” sheds light on the survivors’ understanding of their lived experience of violence. He writes, “Time is a continuum; placing an event in time requires that the continuum be broken down and made discrete” (1991: 69). No doubt, the choices made in the breaking down of moments on the continuum reflect 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 people were killed in the Panzós massacre.

In my review of fifty-five paid advertisements placed in the Guatemalan newspaper *El Gráfico* in 1978 by various popular organizations, I found a June 18 full-page ad that 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 FAFG (2000: 57), which named the thirty-five skeletons exhumed; with the *Nunca más (Never Again)* report by Archbishop’s Office for Human Rights (REMHI 1998: 4:69), which named eight of the massacre victims; and with the CEH’s *Memory of Silence* report, which named fifty-three victims (1999: 16:21). Portelli’s grammar of time is also important to consider when reviewing these varying numbers because he draws attention to the often overlooked variable of the researcher’s tim-

ing: 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. Of the thirty-five skeletons, the FAFG named twenty-five victims based on forensic identification, including the probable identification of twenty-three based on antemortem interviews and two positive identifications based on antemortem interviews in tandem with the laboratory testing of skeletal remains. The possibility of DNA testing was eliminated because all the skeletons displayed an advanced stage of decomposition due to the soil's high acidity level. Insufficient scientific data prohibited the positive identification of the remaining ten skeletons, as well as the scientific confirmation of the additional ten names I collected through testimonies.

The Archbishop's *Nunca más* report, also known as the REMHI (*Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, the Interdiocese Project for the Recuperation of Historical Memory) report, most clearly raises the variable of timing in research, as well as that of access to survivors and witnesses. When the REMHI 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 REMHI investigators had to be extremely cautious about their own security, as well as that of their witnesses. Unlike us in our forensic investigation of Panzós, REMHI 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, MINUGUA and CEH representatives, the human rights ombudsman, national and international press representatives, 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, largely resulted from previous investigative work conducted in the area and support given to community members by REMHI and MINUGUA. The willingness of witnesses and survivors to come forward was also increased by the signing of 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 investigation, the REMHI report, which named eight victims, was based on four testimonies (1998: 69).

Because the CEH report was written after the commission received our forensic documentation of the exhumation, the CEH list of fifty-three named victims is extremely interesting. In its final report, the CEH 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 the names of those who were injured in the plaza and died after fleeing the army massacre, of those who drowned in the river fleeing, and of those who were executed by security forces shortly thereafter. Thus the CEH concluded that “the Guatemalan army arbitrarily executed fifty-three people and attempted to kill another forty-seven who were injured in the plaza massacre,” resulting in “a grave violation of the right to life” (1999: 6:21). 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 and those occurring shortly thereafter that could be tied to the violence meted out by the army in the plaza.

While the REMHI report was affected 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 positive 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 REMHI reports. The ad from 1978 naming sixty-eight victims was based on whatever information the witnesses and survivors to whom the organization had access in the nineteen days following the massacre provided.<sup>8</sup>

Each of these organizations’ methodologies in compiling a list of victims was grounded, to some degree, in the collection of survivor testimony. And testimonies, as the theorist 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 and the involvement of the listener and documentor also form 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 massacre victims. They can also be regarded as “the real and significant historical fact” that is “memory itself” (Portelli 1991: 26), and this memory is one of genocide. The only certainty we can derive from the study of genocide is that for all that we can learn and document from investigating these types of atrocities, regardless of our methodologies, 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.

Still, despite the limitations we may encounter when attempting to understand such limit events as the Guatemalan army genocide of the **Maya**, we cannot allow atrocity to “be its own explanation. Violence cannot be allowed to speak for itself, for violence is not its own meaning. To be made thinkable, it needs to be historicized” (Mamdani 2001: 228–29). Panzós massacre survivors have continued to historicize the 1978 massacre and their own cultural history through the building of a local community museum that includes testimonies of massacre survivors. This museum was built to ensure that future generations would know their own history as **told** by their surviving elders. In this essay, I have demonstrated the key role of **Maya** survivors in historicizing La Violencia and the importance of **local** mobilizations for exhumations to national debates about truth, **human** rights, and justice. This article has called attention to the myriad ways in which rural **Maya** have created and seized political spaces in Guatemala’s nascent democracy, thereby making **Maya** community human rights organizing a nexus between **Maya** citizens and the nation (Sanford 2003). Moreover, it points to the absolute necessity of **Maya** participation in constructing national and community political structures and practices for these projects to truly realize their creative intention of developing a new moral vision of equality and human rights in Guatemala.

## Notes

This essay is dedicated to the survivors of Panzós. I draw on field research conducted in September 1997 and May 1998 with the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation for their report to the Commission for Historical Clarification. Without the generosity of the forensic team and the trust of the community, this work would not have been possible. Fulbright-Hays, Inter-American Foundation, and MacArthur Consortium grants made the research possible. I especially thank Anna Haughton, Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, and Phyllis Beech for reviewing drafts of this article, and Shannon Speed for including me in this volume. Any errors and all opinions expressed are mine alone.

1. It is interesting to note that recent publications also cite more than one hundred deaths. Most cite between one hundred and two hundred deaths. Judith Zur gives seven hundred.
2. 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 (FAFG 2000). The methodology was then repli-

cated in two additional investigations for the CEH in Belen, Sacatepequez and Chel, Chajul, El Quiché. In May and June of 1998, I wrote the historical reconstruction of the massacres in Panzós and Acul and supervised the writings of the reconstructions for Belen and Chel. The report I coauthored was presented to the CEH in a public conference with copies for the public and published by the FAFG in 2000.

3. Interview with the author, Panzós, July 23, 1997.
4. Interview with the author, Coban, July 23, 1997.
5. Both translators requested that their real names not be used.
6. Panzós Testimony Nos. 1, 2, 3, 9, 12, 19—September 6, 1997; 3, 4, 10—September 7, 1997; 8, 13, 18—October 9, 1997.
7. This section builds on previously published pieces on the Panzós massacre. See Sanford 2003, 1999, 2001, 2000, 1997.
8. At the entrance to Panzós shortly after the massacre, soldiers verbally and physically abused journalists trying to cover the massacre. They were denied entry and soldiers took away their cameras and tape recorders at gunpoint. See *El Imparcial*, June 1, 1978.