Breaking the Reign of Silence

Ethnography of a Clandestine Cemetery

Perhaps all one can really hope for, as 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.

ANDRE BRINK, A DRY WHITE SEASON

Between 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 350,000 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 Pamplona. 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 LaCapra has noted: the mobilization of memory "relates acknowledgment and immanent critique to situational transparency of the past that is not total but is nonetheless essential for opening up more desirable possibilities in the future" (1998: 46). 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 2009).

Thus in the Maya region of Guatemala, where human rights violations peaked at a horrific rate during the 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'eqchí 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: 295; Levenson-Estrada 1994: 142; Wilson 1995: 218; Aguilera Peralta 1981: 200; Montefiore 1999: 401; Zut 1998: 69).1 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.2

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

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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 the 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 Monzón—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—who 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 Maquin, in the plaza. "I saw people dying there," Mama 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."

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 Panama 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 evening. She said, "Until recently violence and
silence reigned in Panay."

Testimony and the Excavation of Memory
On our return to Panay to begin the excavation in September of 1997, the
fourteen 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
covered the walls of wood slats and bamboo-like sticks. The dirt floor was
steeply sloped. The sparse furnishings gave the room a spacious feeling. In one
corner there 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 white plastic. Candles, a few flowers in a glass 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 work-
space. We moved the table from the center of the room to the empty
corners. Only when the rays of the afternoon sun heat 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 testi-
 monies, 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 30, 1978, Edelmi-
ro 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 Panay, 24). We wondered where the other 173 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 interviewer and the person interviewed. The women nodded in agreement with me and with each other. I explained that we would use the information from the interviews for our report to the Comisión de Clarificación Histórica (Historical Clarification Commission, cch), 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 Panamá, but that people's identities would remain anonymous. In individual interviews, from this first day on, the majority of Panamá 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 Cas 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 Cas was the public gathering place during the excavation and María Maquin has been featured in national and international news stories following the re-burial 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 past 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 meeting 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 DebraHonrita 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" (Panza's Testimony No. 2, September 7, 1998). While survivors come forward and speak for many different reasons, many wish to unburden their pain to share the context of their lived experiences 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 Panzón, we returned to the municipal archives with more PAX team members to help us review and make note of pertinent data from all Panzón 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 presumed that same morning) was on vacation and would not be returning until the end of October. We would be welcome to return to Panzón 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 Caniche 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 MONTEGAS 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
libros 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 curvilinear circles in blue ink, com-
pletely covering all writing below.

Several survivors members stayed at the municipal offices to record data
from the death registers and council meeting minutes. I returned to the police
house above the graveyard with my research assistant, Leonor, and the
interpreters, Miguel and María, to take testimonials. 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
towel 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 sur-
vivors, 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 Paroís.

In all, we interviewed almost two hundred people in Paroís and several
more in other parts of the country. The first day we interviewed eigh-
ten 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’es came to our house. They were Q’eqchi’es 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 barrels, 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. 5, September 6, 1997).

Wiping the sweat from her brow with a small hand towel, Doña Juana sits 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 catchitch. 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 exhausting 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 oldest 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

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In most cases, Asig, the chief of police (popularly known as El Canchel) 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.

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 four-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 past apurar (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, “Yo siento no decir; Quiero ahorrarar un poco mas” (“I feel relieved, I want to relieve myself a little more.”)

"A Year of Death", Juanita, Feliciana, and Magalrnera

Dolfa Jandia 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 walks 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 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. “Maldito,” she thanks me. As she stands, she squeezes my hand before she walks away (Pozzo’s Testimony No. 7, September 7, 1997).
After Doña Juanaita, three women and one man gave their testimonies. Doña Felicitana is the eleventh interview on September 7, 1997. She sits 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 Felicitana’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 quintal to carry it one to three kilometers." (Pazños 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." (Pazños 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 acknowledgement of terror and its memory. As Jorge Luis Borges has noted, "Only one thing does not exist. It is forgetting." (op. cit. Benedetti 1999: 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 sequenced, disappeared, and as-
assassinated 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 of 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 Hearing Witnesses*

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 Panjós massacre reported Guatemalan army soldiers firing into a large group of peasants protecting land in the plaza in front of the municipal office, 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 50 to 2,000.

The next issue that had initially armed a controversy became both a critical and an extremely delicate question. While news articles, books, and political propaganda documenting the Panjós massacre consistently outlined the army shooting at 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 hear witnesses), but we also needed facts for our report to the CASA. By the third day, as the PASO 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 pales (sticks) in their possession, and possiblyewing 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 FAEC report to the CSSH, 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 witnesses 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 "Subhash") may 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 Bertleheim 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 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” (85–91).

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.
(Pantós Testimony No. 7, September 7, 1997)

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DOÑA FRANCISCA
We had gone to make Mayejak [Muya 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. 3, 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)

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

A paper came from Guatemala City. The mayor was the one who received the paper. He knew that the people wanted land and so he called everyone, "Everyone who needs land should come." So there was a great conversation. People arrived from everywhere. (Panco's Testimony No. 1, October 27, 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 posts, "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 salón, and the church." (Panco's 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 land 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 Violence, 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 20, 1978, there was a burst of gunfire into the crowd gathered in the Panco 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 interveis
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 accre-
tion 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 selecting 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 men asked the question the same time and no
one responded. After they had asked for these documents several times and no
one responded, they opened fire. (Pazos 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. (Pazos Testimony No. 1, October 17, 1997)

DOÑA MANUELA

A campesina tried to snatch a weapon, but didn’t know how to use it. (Pazos
Testimony No. 1, October 2, 1997)

MARIA MAQUIN

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
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

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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. (Panzon Testimony No. 2, September 6, 1997)

**Dona Manuel**
The Siete Risa Maquin (Maquin Family) 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. (Panzon Testimony No. 1, October 2, 1997)

**Don Jacinto**
Everyone was thrown down on the ground. Some were bleeding. They were injured. They were covered in blood. (Panzon Testimony No. 8, September 6, 1997)

**Dona Pelipa**

**Dona 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." (Panzon 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 newspaper articles written by journalists who visited Panzón 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. This number was significantly lower than that expected by the-FAR and the CAFE. Indeed, as we began the exhumation, popular opinion placed the death toll between one and two hundred victims (see Barroca García 1984; Barry 1986; Black 1984; Cieza 1979; Figueras Riera 1991; Aguilar 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 Panamá 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 Panamá municipal archives corroborated survivor and widow testimonies of deaths following the massacre. The oral historian Alejandro 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 Panamá massacre.

In my review of fifty-five paid advertisements placed in the Guatemalan newspaper El Grafico in 1979 by various popular organizations. I found a June 18 full-page ad that provided a list of sixty-eight named victims of the Panamá massacre. I have cross-checked the names in this ad with the names of victims listed in reports prepared by the FARC (1990c: 57), which named the thirty-five skeletons exhumed; with the Nunciata (Never Again) report by Archbishop's Office for Human Rights (Nunciata 1990: 469), which named eight of the massacre victims; and with the CAFE'S Memory of Silence report, which named fifty-three victims (1999: 164). 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 FAAP 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 Nunciatura report, also known as the REMHI (Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperacion de la Memoria Historica, the Interdiocesan Project for the Recovery 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, weiling 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 Punson, 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 CER 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 of these individuals and organizations. Indeed, their presence added 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 Punson. 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 CERH report was written after the commission received our forensic documentation of the exhumation, the CERH list of fifty-three named victims is extremely interesting. In its final report, the CERH noted that the forensic report revealed thirty-five skeletons in the mass grave. The CERH 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 CERH 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" (1992: 21). The CERH'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 HRRWI 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 CERH's timing and legal methodology allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of the violence experienced in the Panamá massacre than the forensic or HRRWI 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. 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" (1990: 37). Both the testimony of the witness and the involvement of the listener and documenter 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 1992: 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). Panajachel massacre survivors have continued to historicize the 1981 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.

Nefas

This essay is dedicated to the survivors of Panajachel. 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 Haugh, Helene Pobladı-McCormick, and Phyllis Beech for reviewing drafts of this article. And Shannon Sperd 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 Zun gives seven hundred.

2. At the request of the ICRC, I developed a research methodology and led the investigation for the historical reconstruction of 499 survivors in Panajachel, Alta Verapaz, and Suchi, Nefas, El Quiché (1995–2000). The methodology was then repli...
cated in two additional investigations for the cain in Belen, Sacatepequez and Chel, Chimal, El Quiché. In May and June of 1998, I wrote the historical recon-
struction of the massacres in Panaris and Acal and supervised the writings of the reconstructions for Belen and Chel. The report I coauthored was presented to the 
cain in a public conference with copies for the public and published by the SSIC in 2000.


4. Interview with the author, Coban, July 31, 1997.

5. Both translators requested that their real names not be used.

6. Panaris Testimony Nos. 1, 2, 3, 9, 13, 19—September 6, 1997; 3, 4, 10—September 7, 1997; 8, 13, 18—October 9, 1997.


8. At the entrance to Panaris 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, 1998.