A Companion to Latin American Anthropology

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In June of 1994, I began my fieldwork focusing on the exhumation by the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG) of the clandestine cemetery in Plan de Sánchez. After a six-hour bus ride, Kathleen Di and I reached Rabinal — at the time, a small rural town of about 6,000 inhabitants with some 18,000 more living in surrounding villages (FAFG 1995a:19). It was in the late afternoon on a Thursday and we noticed that all the doors and windows of the houses were shut. We reached Rabinal just as the team was departing for Guatemala City for the weekend to take care of some paperwork. We had missed the FAFG’s first week of work at the site. They offered us a ride to the city in the back of the truck. By then, it was nearly four o’clock and we had been in transit (30 buses) since six in the morning. We decided to stay for the weekend. There was no public transportation to Plan de Sánchez and it wasn’t safe for us to walk to the village alone. So we waited until Monday when the FAFG returned in the early morning to go up the mountain. Though just eight kilometres above Rabinal, it took some 40 minutes for a four-wheel drive vehicle to climb the mountains to reach the small village. It lies so high in the mountains that we left the fog of the morning behind in the valley of Rabinal. We reached the clear morning sky at the top of the mountain. Looking down, we saw a blanket of clouds resting in the valley.

When we reached Plan de Sánchez and began to hike up the hill to the clandestine cemetery, my body was overcome with a cold sweat. My hands were alternately hot and cold, and sweating regardless. I felt light-headed and my stomach started to cramp. I remembered having seen a video of the first FAFG exhumation in El Quiché. In the video, internationally renowned forensic anthropologist Dr Clyde Snow was holding what looked like a reddish brown walnut in his hand and saying, “This is a piece of brain matter.” My feet felt heavy as I continued the short walk up the hill. I began to
concentrate on not fainting. I felt like I was going to vomit. "Don't faint. Don't vomit. I won't faint. I won't vomit," I repeated to myself as the conversations around me seemed to drift far away. Then I began to panic. I thought, "I can't faint and I can't vomit." I was humiliated in front of the survivors with whom I want to work and I will be incapable of carrying out my research. This is too important."

Then, we were at the site.

Much to my relief, there were no visible skeletons because the team never leave any exposed. They always complete as much as they can before leaving and even any incompletely excavated skeleton. Recovering from the negative rush of adrenaline, still felt like I was outside my body. As I stood above the large open pit watching the archaeologists uncover half-excavated skeletons, the lead archaeologist Fernando Moscoco handed me a chopstick and a small paintbrush. He pointed to a section of the grave and said, "If you please, why don't you begin by cleaning out that area over there." I was lost somewhere in what Jewish Mish-ka said "being in the in-between of all definitions of truth" (1992:15). The "in-between" of I'm not vomiting, I haven't fainted, what a beautiful valley, everything is greener than green, those are real bones, my god two hundred people were massacred here, their relatives are watching. Self-consciously, I felt as if all the people (and especially the peasants) were registering my discomfort until I realized that Fernando was talking to me. Without thinking, I obediently accepted the chopstick and brushes. I climbed into the grave, slowly walked over to the section he had indicated and gingerly began no clear way loose dirt. My training in anthropology prepared me to study sociocultural structures, from the community to the nation-state. I had no training in the archaeological skills of site excavation or any of the osteological knowledge necessary to analyze skeletal remains. As reluctantly began to brush away the earth, I didn't even notice that my friend Kathleen had been sent to work with another archaeologist. Unlike me, Kathleen was well prepared for this type of work because she had extensive knowledge of the human skeleton and skeletal trauma, having had years of working as an x-ray and surgical imaging technician. She also had some training in archaeology. Kathleen was the immediate asset to the team.

As for me, I imagined that at he watched my tentative and clumsy movements, Fernando realized I had no idea what I was doing. He came over to where I was and showed me how to brush the dirt and brush more systematically. Soon, I was caught in the intricacies of the excavation and in many puzzles. When I discovered a bone, I had to think about which bone it was, which meant I also had to learn the human skeleton, I had to think about how the skeleton was positioned and how best to uncover it. I had to learn the intricacies of an incredibly tedious process. Fernando supervised my work. He had a lot more confidence in my abilities than I did. When I completed the process of brushing the earth away from the skeleton, Fernando would join me. He would lift the bone and examine each bone. He would show me whatever signs of trauma or damage he found. I would inventory the bones, record any observations of trauma, mark the bag in which the bones were to be stored, and pack them away. As the day ended, I was relieved that I had not had to sit and watch all day. I found patience doing the digging and it was a pattern I knew I would have eluded had my role been restricted to that of observer.

The excavation of a clandestine cemetery is much more than the archaeological excavation of the graves. Each excavation has its phases. This methodology of the forensic anthropology investigation has been developed by the IAME through its experience working in Maya communities, often under complicated circumstances,
including geographic inaccessibility of isolated communities and lack of adequate facilities for carrying out the work. Indeed, FAFO co-founder and former president Fernando Moscoso wrote his thesis at the Universidad de San Carlos in Guatemala on this process. His 1998 thesis, "La antropología forense en Guatemala," is considered the blueprint for training forensic anthropologists.

The FAFO was founded in 1992 with the assistance of Dr Clyde Snow and the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, EAAF). Indeed, founded in 1984, the EAAF was the first forensic anthropology team of its kind in the world and, like the FAFO, it was founded under the leadership of Dr Clyde Snow. Just as the EAAF was founded to investigate massacres by the Guatemalan military regimes of the 1980s, the EAAF was founded to investigate the disappearance of at least 10,000 Argentines during the military regime from 1976 to 1983. Prior to the founding of the Argentine team, investigation into those who disappeared during Argentina’s military dictatorship was unscientific and haphazard, which meant that whatever remains were unearthed provided no real forensic evidence for the identification of remains, and certainly no evidence for any court cases.

Forensic anthropology grew out of the post-authoritarian period following the end of the Argentine military regime, when elected President Alfonsin established the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), and the Commission, along with the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo (who were grandmothers of the disappeared), requested help from the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Thus, a delegation of American forensic scientists and geneticists visited Argentina for the first time in 1984 with a human rights mission.

Dr Clyde Snow, a member of the delegation, called for an immediate halt to the non-scientific exhumations that were literally bulldozing through known grave sites of the disappeared. Further, he called on archaeologists, anthropologists and forensic doctors to bring their expertise to the human rights field by developing scientifically replicable methodologies for the exhumation and analysis of skeletal remains. The Argentine Forensic Team was founded shortly thereafter, in 1984, and Dr Snow made numerous visits to Argentina for more than five years to provide training in forensic anthropology for the investigation of human rights violations in Argentina. Eight years later, the Argentine team and Dr Snow jointly assisted in the founding of the FAFO.

In this chapter, I am going to explore the practice of forensic anthropology and its outcomes in Latin America through my own experiences with the FAFO. Forensic anthropology in Guatemala exemplifies the challenges and triumphs of forensic anthropology in Latin America, where survivors of cold war dictatorships continue to struggle to find their loved ones, hold proper burials and seek justice in national and regional courts. Thus, forensic anthropology is a scientific research tool as well as a vital component in the search for truth and the struggle to end impunity by legal means in Latin America. Highlighting the Plan de Sánchez case provides an opportunity to witness the effects of the exhumation on the community, as well as see the legal outcomes over time.

Four Phases of Forensic Anthropology

The methodology of the forensic anthropologist investigation has four phases. The first phase includes antemortem interviews, collection of survivor testimony, and
Making A Case

In 1994, two years before the the Guatemalan army and guerrillas had signed the 1996 peace accords, before the Guatemalan army's civil patrols had been demobilized, before the United Nations Mission in Guatemala or any international NGOs had arrived, and before the reform of the judicial system, on September 15, 1994, the Attorney General, the Attorney General's office, and the Attorney General's office for human rights investigations released a report on the summary executions of hundreds of civilians in the state of Huehuetenango.

The PDH, the local justice of the peace and representatives from human rights groups regularly visited both sites to accompany and support the survivors and the work of the FAPG. CONAVIGUA (Coordination, National, of Las Viudas de Guatemala), National Coordinating Committee of the Widows of Guatemala) and GAM (Gruppo de Apoyo Mütz, Mught Support Group) provided food for the forensic team as they worked and also provided the resources for the removal of remains when they were returned to the communities. Whereas previous exhumations had been initiated by these human rights groups by providing legal support and filing complaints at the request of survivors, the Rabinal exhumations were unique in that they were initiated by local residents with no apparent organizational support.

Juan Manuel Geromino’s Testimony

I ratified the truth to declare the truth. Before the exhumation, all the people had everything inside. They concealed their feelings. No one would ever think about what had happened, much less make a public declaration. It just didn’t seem possible that anyone had the power to declare these types of things at the national level or international level. We decided that we were going to declare the truth of what happened. We were going to do it legally. We decided that we were going to do it together, all the families united. I encouraged everyone to participate. I told them, “look, please, if they call us, we will all go together. We will all go together and we will get out of here. I am not afraid. If you support me, you will give me more strength to do this.” So, when the Ministerio Público (Public Ministry, Prosecution) called us, we all went together. When the court called us, we all went together. We said, “We want a Christian burial for our families because they aren’t dogs, and we don’t want them piled up in those graves like dogs.”

That’s how we did it.

So, we moved forward together. I said, “We won’t be afraid. We will do this together.” Because we say that one person is in charge of this work, then we’re just giving them a new name. But if we are all together, we can do this work. What we are doing is legal and the law isn’t going to put all of us in jail. These were the ideas we had and this is how we worked together.

One day, the military commissioner (army-appointed civil police leaders) from Chiquinua came here. They had been sent by the chief in Rabinal. They wanted a report. They said, “Who is leading the exhumation here? Who is in charge?” But we just said, “We are all doing this together. We want a proper burial.” After they left, we discussed this. Once again, we all agreed that no one should know anyone else and that no one would say there was a leader. The next thing that happened is that I received a note from the chief of all the PACs (army-controlled civil patrols) in Rabinal. The note said that I was to go to Rabinal to meet with him because he wanted to talk to me. I didn’t go.

Several days later, he found me walking down the street in Rabinal. He asked me, “Look, what’s going on with this business up there?” I said, “What business?” Then he said, “Look, you, what’s going on with this business up there? What’s going on with this exhumation?” I said, “Do you mean how will it be done? First, we are going to exhume the remains and then we are going to rebury them. But I don’t know when.” Then he said, “Who has told you this? Who is behind this?” “No one,” I said, “We are doing it by ourselves.” “But you are working with an organization, aren’t you?” he said. And said, “No. The only organization is our own strength and commitment. So, if you would like to support us somehow with some money—just would be helpful.”

He didn’t know how to respond. He said, “How’s that?” And I said, “Well, it would be like an instruction helping us. We want to do the exhumation.” He just accepted that and walked away confused because I hadn’t told him anything.
CONAVIGUA was really helping us. The truth is they explained to us how we could make our declarations, how to complete the forms, and where to take them. We are very poor. We don’t have any money for taking buses. So, whenever we had to go to the Ministerio Público or the court, they would reimburse our transportation costs. Thanks to God, they helped us a lot. I hope God repays them for their good deeds. They really struggled to help us. But we did our part. We did all the work ourselves. We made all the trips to file the paperwork. That is why it was important for all of us to go together to do these filings. The widows from CONAVIGUA were in agreement that no one should go alone. They said, “Believe us, if only one person goes by himself, somewhere along the road, in one of those holes, you’re going to find him buried.” This made a lot of the people scared, but we stuck together. I was never afraid. I don’t know why, I just never was.

**THE EXHUMATION IN PLAN DE SÁNCHEZ**

There was always a lot of activity at the excavation site. Because exhumations are carried out as an investigatory procedure of the court, municipal police maintain a 24-hour presence to guard the site, observe the excavation, and conserve legal custody of all evidence exhumed. In 1994, Rabinal had only one police officer, so the court requested assignment of several customs police because neither the FÁGN nor the community wanted soldiers or paramilitary police at the exhumation site. Four customs police were stationed for three weeks at a time in Plan de Sánchez. They set up a large tent at the base of the hill where they camped—supposedly providing 24-hour security to the area. Each day after the remains were cataloged and boxed by both the forensic team and the police, the boxes were transported to Rabinal where they were stored in the modest office of the justice of the peace.

In tandem with the archaeological procedures, Maya rituals marked different moments of the excavation. Before the ground was broken, the Maya priest (sacificial Maya) conducted a religious ceremony. Maya priests are the keepers of Maya religious tradition (costumbrismo), which the Maya have maintained and reinvented since the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century. While many have viewed Maya costumbrismo as a syncretic blending of Maya belief systems with Catholicism, the cult of Catholic saints is also a blending of Maya religion with Catholicism. Each religion reminds us that belief systems are never static, but always changing. For the Achi, as for other Maya, it is sacrilegious to disturb the remains of the dead because wherever the blood of the dead has spilled in burial, the spirits of the dead hover above. To disturb the bones is to disturb the spirits. However, because it was the desire of the community that the truth of these clandestine graves be known, that their loved ones have proper religious burials, and that there be justice, the Maya priest performed a special ceremony before each grave was opened.

While every culture places significance on its particular burial practices, Maya ritual practices at the graves of ancestors implicate not only the passing of the ancestor but also the identity, rights and responsibilities of the living. Archaeologist Patricia Macanany dates these practices back to before the Conquest and notes that “very few royal tombs were sealed and never revisited, most were periodically reopened for an elaborate ceremony of burning incense. It almost seems as though it was vitally important to maintain open pathways of communication with the ancestors” (Macanany 1995). These rituals at burial sites implicate the enactment of deeply held beliefs about individual and community identity and reckoning in the past as well as the present.
Lighting candles, burning copal incense on the area adorned with red gladiasls and pine needles, the Maya priest would first speak with God to explain why the exhumation should take place and ask permission from God to disturb the bones. Then the priest would call upon the spirits to explain to them that God had given permission for the exhumation to take place. He would plead with the spirits to heed God’s call. Instead of using their powers against those who disturb the bones, the priest asked the spirits to use their powers to bless and protect the forensic team and all who worked at the exhumation.

Everyone in Plan de Sánchez worked to support the exhumation. The men organized a schedule so that everyone helped with the manual labor, but also had time to tend their fields. I was struck by the volunteers who came representing popular human rights organizations. These peasant men and women were giving up their time working for their own livelihood to support an exhumation that wasn’t even in their own communities. They said they came because they wanted to learn more about the exhumations and because they hoped people would come when they had their exhumations in their own communities. “If we are together, we have greater strength and less fear,” explained a massacre survivor from a faraway Chichicastenango village in El Quiché. These volunteers came for ten days at a time. Within the village, each man gave several days a week of his time. All helped to do the heavy digging that was necessary before the delicate brushing work of the excavation could begin. They also carried all the dirt out of the graves to sift it. (This sifting is necessary for finding bullet and grenade fragments.) It was the rainy season, so shelters had to be built over the work sites and gullies had to be dug around the perimeter to prevent the water from flooding the open graves. The work was further complicated by the steepness of the mountainside where many of the graves were located. In all, there were 18 graves, so there was a lot of digging, sifting, and building.

When I first arrived at the site, one of my tears was that I would be overcome by the smell of death. That first day, working in the graves that had been opened and exposed for several days prior, there was no smell, or if there was, I didn’t notice it. The flesh had decomposed and the remains were bones still dressed in the clothes that had not yet decomposed. Rather than the trepidation I had expected to feel about being (just being) near the bones, I felt great tenderness because they seemed fragile, vulnerable, and somehow almost noble. These were the final traces that confirmed that a human being, this human being had existed. Sometimes when we opened a new grave or if it was a dumb day, a slight smell of life lingered. It wasn’t a putrid smell, the earth had long since absorbed the rot of death. The scent that lingered was the light murky smell of birth or a stillborn puppy or that of wine fermenting in oak barrels, not a noxious aroma, but one of movement or transmutation in the soil with the mountains and its pine trees, flowers, rich earth, and luscious green grass.

The scent of burning ka’va (firewood) and the resin used to start cooking fires wafted over the site, blending with all the other smells. As their husbands worked on the exhumation of their first families, the current wives of these men (most themselves previously widowed by massacres) prepared food for the forensic team and anyone else who helped with the work. This meant grinding corn, putting out tortillas, and preparing a large cauldron of beans or soup for what usually amounted to some 35 additional mouths to feed each day. They also prepared and (hot corn drinks) for us twice during the day.
As the forensic team and community members worked on the excavation, campesinos from nearby villages walked as many as six hours to reach the site to observe the exhumation. These campesinos, like the villagers of Plan de Sánchez, were leaning in expressing their support of the exhumation by their mere presence. They were setting the political space opened by the exhumation and further extending it. Each day, dozens of people came. Not only was no one in Plan de Sánchez singled out, but the presence of villagers from other communities demonstrated that the people of Plan de Sánchez were not alone. A profound expression of what Michel Foucault called "the power effects of truth" (1980:31).

During the exhumation, local campesinos were always waiting and watching. While the excavation of massacre victims may seem like a gruesome endeavor, it is the presence of these local Maya peasants that enables the forensic team members to do their work. It is not simply the collaboration of local labor that helps. It is also the great respect for the dead and the living, and the spiritual and emotional strength that community members bring to the site, that encourages everyone involved to continue their work each day.

The police were always watching from a distance. They often stood behind a tree and would peek out to watch us. They weren't scared of us or the graves, they were scared of the photographers. A photographer demonstrated to me that all he had to do was take out his camera and the police would scatter running behind trees. When I asked them why they had, one of the police said, "If my picture is taken here, people might think I support it, that I am taking a side. I could lose my job." At the time, I just thought he meant that military institutions, including the customs police, were against the exhumations.

A few days later, I was excavating a skeleton. It was the skeleton of a woman who was face-down in the grave. She had a shawl wrapped around her upper body. As I opened her shawl, the skeleton of an infant was revealed. The same customs officer came out from behind his tree. He worked right up to the edge of the grave. As he leaned into the grave, he called the other three officers. He said, "Look, look at this. It's a woman with a baby on her back. They told us these were pure guerrillas. These aren't guerrillas. That's a mother and a baby. That's a crime." As the other police came closer to watch, the villagers joined them. One of the police said, "A woman and her baby. Poor woman. Poor baby. I sure would like to machine gun whoever did that." And all the villagers quietly backed away to the other side of the grave. Still, after witnessing the excavation of this woman with a baby on her back, the officers stopped hiding behind trees and voluntarily began to help with the normal labor in the excavation.

"Leave the Dead in Peace"

Each Thursday afternoon, we would return to Guatemala City to do paperwork, visit with friends and family, and rest. Before dawn on Monday, we would be on the road returning to Rabinal. When we reached Plan de Sánchez on the morning of July 25, there were only a few villagers from Plan de Sánchez waiting for us at the grave site and there were no villagers from outside — usually there were several dozen. The mood was somber and everyone was very quiet. The widows of Plan de Sánchez met with us to explain what had happened.
The day before, on Sunday, the subcommander of the army base in Rabinal had ordered all men from the villages to attend a meeting at the army base. The order was received in the morning. By noon, there were several thousand men waiting in the sun at the base. At two in the afternoon, the subcommander got into the crowd and began a lecture. He told the peasants not to pursue the exhumations. "The anthropologists, internationals and journalists are all guerrillas," he explained. "You know what happens when you help the guerrillas. Collaborating with the guerrillas will bring back the violence of 1982," he warned. "Now, I am going to give you an order," he said. "Leave the dead in peace" (collective interview with Plan de Sánchez, July 25, 1994).

While the men attending the meeting at the base were too frightened to contradict anything the subcommander said, they were not dissuaded from continuing to work on the exhumation. They had increased local security by coordinating trips to their fields and to Rabinal to ensure that no one ever traveled alone and also to make sure that there were always some men in the village. They recommended to us that we not walk alone in Rabinal during the daytime, and that at night we not walk around outside at all.

When we suggested that a delegation could go to the capital to denounce the army's threats, the villagers informed us that they had pooled their resources on Sunday afternoon to pay the bus fare for several men to go to the capital to do just that. Thus, the army's threats were denounced to the Human Rights Ombudsmen, the court, and the national press. At the end of the week, the army made a public statement in which they claimed that the subcommander was not expressing army policy and that he had been transferred to another base. Word of this statement traveled quickly through Rabinal. By the following week, we were back to several dozen local visitors each day at the site.

Later, Juan Manuel admitted to us that the villagers had held a meeting to discuss what we (the forensic team) should be told about the assembly at the army base. Several people were worried that we might not complete the exhumation if we knew about the army's threat. Though we never mentioned it to the villagers, we were concerned they might pull out of the exhumation because of the threats. The consensus of this political chess game, however, of both the forensic team and the villagers, was that if the exhumation was not completed, then the army would have more power than it had before the exhumation began. This consensus revealed a highly nuanced understanding of the politics of power relations and also the palpable sensation that on any given day, the balance of power could shift in the side of either the army or civil society.

This was neither the first, nor the last, attempt directed at the team or its work. In March 2002, 11 current and former FAEG forensic anthropologists were under 24 hour protection due to death threats. On February 21, 2002, they received individually typed letters: "We will finish you off... you aren't the ones to judge us. If the exhumations don't stop, your families will be burying your bones and those of your children" (personal communication with FAEG president Frédy Pecorelli, February 24, 2002 and with former FAEG president Fernando Mascorro, February 28, 2002). After a decade of forensic anthropology investigations into massacres and more than 190 exhumations, those threats were intended to intimidate the FA anthropologists who were scheduled to be called as forensic expert witnesses in forthcoming court cases against current and former high-ranking army officials, and the first case
suggested to be heard was Plan de Sánchez. And as recently as March 2006, FAAG members received death threats.

In terms of the team's response to the 1994 death threat, some members of the forensic team recognized it as a death threat, while others categorized it merely as part of the army's campaign to discredit human rights work. Plan de Sánchez survives, however, viewed the subcommander's statement not only as a death threat, but also as a signal to both the civil paroles to attack—hence their recommendations about our safety in Rafaela. Though it heightened our consciousness of individual and group security practices, we continued our work institute as always—traveling in mass, never walking alone, never leaving the vehicle unattended, and never driving or departing at night the same time (which was, more often than not, a result of lack of planning rather than the reverse).

Less than two weeks after the army's disclaimer, on August 10, the departament human-rights ombudsman in Salta and the national PDH received identical death threats: "doa[sic] en pas[sic] los asteros His de pata" [leave the dead in peace son of a whore]. At the same time, I was conducting interviews with government officials in Guayaquil City, a high-ranking member of the Guatemalan government's Peace Commission (then representing the government and army in peace negotiations) told me that "no member of the forensic team should believe themselves be immune to violent reprisals." He emphasized that a US passport should not be assimilated to provide protection from such reprisals. When I asked him if this was a threat from the army, he said, "it doesn't matter where I heard this or who told me. And it isn't a threat, it is a warning."

When I later met with the national Human Rights Ombudsman Jorge Mario Garcia La Guajira and asked him about the death threat the PDH had received, he shrugged his shoulders and shook me a stack of threats he had received. "This is the reality of our work," he said. "If I stopped to contemplate the implications of each of these threats, I would be immobilized." "This reminded me of Fernando Moscoso, who once explained how he continued working even when he was warned. "When I am executing, I am conscious that in a year, or two, or three, the skeleton in the ground will be mine.""

"Be the end of my interview with Garcia La Guajira, it was early evening. He offered me a ride to my next destination because I had mentioned to him that a man had attempted to assassinate me in Guayaquil City several days earlier. When I arrived for the interview, I was meeting that the ombudsman had given me a ride and that security was impression (the driver and two guards each with automatic weapons), they returned that I would have been safer calling. "No one rides with the PDH. Those guards and guns are worth nothing if someone drives by and opens machine gun fire.

"YOU ARE SEEING THE TRUTH"

After all the graves had been examined, there were 18 large holes in the earth. The sizes of the graves ranged from eight by ten feet to fifteen by twenty feet. Each was about four to five feet deep. Because it was the rainy season, the holes quickly filled with water. As I looked at the gaping holes in the earth, they seemed to be many things. They looked like miniature versions of the sounds left in the earth by nickel mines or gravel pits. They looked like muddy ponds, the area, which had always been
filled with people, was deserted and the holes heightened the empty feeling of absence. My thoughts were broken by the laughter of children who trailed Juan Manuel, Erazmo, Pablo, and Jose. We sat on a grassy knoll and looked at the empty spaces, the valley below and the mountain range beyond it.

"It looks sad here," said Don Erazmo. "But when we have a proper burial, everyone will live with tranquility." He said this with the knowledge that it was unlikely he would receive the remains of his family members because it appeared that they had been among those who were burned beyond recognition. As he spoke, the children played with each other and climbed on their fathers, seeking embraces.

By the end of the exhumation, I had interviewed all survivors of the massacre still living in Plan de Sánchez. I asked them why they wanted the exhumation. In addition to not wanting their relatives buried "como perros"—like dogs—each person gave me several reasons beyond the proper burial.

The first and most stark reason is the concrete, the real, the hard evidence. You can touch it. It is the bones of the victims we pulled out of the earth. And, as Dr. Clyde Snow always says, "The bones don't lie." The army claimed there had been a battle with the guerrillas in Plan de Sánchez. The exhumation clearly showed that the vast majority of victims were women, children, and the elderly. Moreover, the forensic evidence unapologetically demonstrated that the skeletons in the grave were victims of a massacre, not in armed confrontation with guerrillas and not civilians caught in crossfire, as the army had asserted about mass graves throughout the country (FARG Exhumation File: Plan de Sánchez Case 519-03, 570 [1997]).

Don Pablo asked me, "How could they say these were guerrilleros? How can an infans of six months or a child of five, six, or seven years be a guerrillero? How can a pregnant woman carrying her basket to market be a guerrillero?" (Rabinal Testimony no. 7-3, July 18, 1994, my archives). About the exhumation, Don Erazmo told me, "Alli, no se mentira. Alli, estaeyendo la verdad." [There, there is no lie. There, you are seeing the truth].

In 1994, I asked them why an already vulnerable community would put itself at greater risk by supporting and actively collaborating with the exhumation. Don Juan Manuel told me that the community supported the exhumation because they wanted "the truth to come out that the victims were natives of the area. Our children, who knew nothing, who owed debts to no one. They killed women and the elderly who did not even understand what they were accused of by the army. Campesinos, poor people. People who work the fields for the corn we eat."

The community wanted the truth to be known. Don Erazmo said, "We have worked for the exhumation. We have worked for truth." I asked what importance truth could have 12 years after the massacre. This is what I was told:

"We want peace. We want people to know what happened here so that it does not happen here again, or in some other village in Guatemala, or in some other department, or in some other country."

"We strongly support this exhumation and that everything is completely investigated because we do not want this to happen again."

"We do this for our children and our children's children."

"We want no more massacres of the Maya."

"We want justice. We want justice because if there is no justice, the massacres will never end. God willing, we will have peace."
Some said they wanted revenge. All said they wanted justice. There was great hope that someone involved in the massacre would be tried in court and prosecuted. Just as army threats had sent tremors of fear through Plan de Sánchez, and indeed throughout Rabinal, the process of the exhumation restored community beliefs in the right to truth and justice. Rural Maya have a strong community tradition of publicly speaking their objections and seeking redress within the local hierarchy. Moreover, in rural Maya culture, the ancestors help the living move into the future. They continue to play a role in the life of the community. They play an important role in defining place and the significance of place as social space, as living space (conversation with Patricia Macanany, April 12, 2000). In this sense, the exhumations resonated with local Maya cultural practices and created new space for the practice of citizenship.

It was the combination of the forensic evidence of the exhumations with the visible resonation of community beliefs in the right to truth and justice that threatened those implicated in the massacres. Denial that those killed had been unarmed civilians remained plausible only as long as the mass graves were untouched. Exhumations not only provided an accusation of truth within the public space of the community, but also an accusation of forensic evidence for court cases and the beginning of a new national and international understanding of La Violencia. As exhumations have proceeded throughout the country, the collective evidence pointed not only to army massacres of unarmed Maya, but to a carefully planned and strategically enacted genocide (Saxford 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b). Indeed, a significant finding of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH, the Guatemalan truth commission) was that the army had carried out genocidal acts. The FAEG also participated in the investigative process of the CEH, carrying out exhumation commissions by the CEH (FAEG 2000).

Conclusion

The testimonies of survivors and the forensic analysis of the remains of massacre victims provided evidence for a petition filed by survivors with the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights in 1995 requesting that the Commission pass the case on to the Inter-American Court. Over the years, in Plan de Sánchez, Kathleen Dill and I have often discussed this case with survivors. While allowing for citizen petitions, the Inter-American process is slow. We would reassure one another that something was bound to happen — especially after we knew that the case had been passed on to the Court. Caution took up to 10 years. “Sooner or later there will be justice” became the refrain for survivors.

On April 29, 2004 the Inter-American Court condemned the Guatemalan government for the July 18, 1982 massacre of 188 Achi-Maya in the village of Plan de Sánchez in the mountains above Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. The Inter-American Court was also convinced that “the bones don’t lie” and found the forensic evidence and testimonies to be both credible and compelling. The Court attributed the massacre to Guatemalan army troops. This is the first ruling by the Inter-American Court against the Guatemalan state for any of the 626 massacres carried out by the army in the early 1980s (IAC 2004a; Sanford 2004). The Court later announced that the Guatemalan state is required to pay $7.9 million to the relatives of victims (IAC 2004b).
Beyond the importance of this judgment for the people of Plan de Sánchez, the Court’s ruling is particularly significant because the following key points were included in the judgment: (1) there was a genocide in Guatemala; (2) this genocide was part of the framework of the internal armed conflict when the armed forces of the Guatemalan government applied their National Security Doctrine in its counterinsurgency actions; (3) these counterinsurgency actions continued after the signing of the General Ríos Montt, who came to power through military coup in March of 1982 (IAC 2004a).

Further, regarding the massacre in Plan de Sánchez, the Court indicated that the armed forces of the Guatemalan government had violated the following rights, each of which is enshrined in the Human Rights Convention of the Organization of American States: the right to personal integrity; the right to judicial protection; the right to judicial guarantees of equality before the law; the right to freedom of conscience; the right to freedom of religion; and, the right to private property (IAC 2004a).

The Plan de Sánchez case was considered by the Inter-American Court at the request of the Inter-American Commission, which received a petition from relatives of the massacre victims. These survivors requested consideration in the Inter-American Court because of the ongoing impunity and lack of justice in the Guatemalan legal system. There is no doubt that both the forensic evidence and testimonies given by forensic anthropology expert witnesses played a key role in the Court’s findings. There are still more than 300 massacre cases supported by forensic evidence pending at the Guatemalan court system, and the FAVG has now completed more than 530 investigations and continues to carry out exhumations throughout the country with the goal of exhuming the 2,000 known clandestine cemeteries (http://www.fag.org/).

Since their founding, both the Guatemalan and Argentine forensic teams have gained international prominence as the leaders in forensic anthropology investigations. Throughout Latin America, they apply their expertise in forensic anthropology to the investigation and documentation of human rights violations to produce scientific evidence for court cases and to assist relatives in the recovery of the remains of their loved ones. To these ends, they have been forensic investigators in Guatemala, Colombia, Bolivia, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Mexico, and Honduras. Both the Argentine and Guatemalan teams have also carried out forensic anthropology investigations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Indonesia, the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Uruguay, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and Sri Lanka, among others (EAAF 2002; FAVG 2005).

Significantly, just as the Argentine team replicated itself in Guatemala, the FAVG and EAAF have also continued to replicate themselves by assisting in the establishment of forensic anthropology teams in Colombia, Peru, and Mexico. These Latin American forensic anthropology groups founded the Latin American Forensic Anthropology Association (ALAF) and now hold regional meetings to strengthen and professionalize forensic anthropology throughout Latin America (EAAF 2002:126).

NOTES
This chapter draws on “Strengthening the Peace Process in Guatemala: A Proposal of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation to the Open Society Institute” (Sandford