

Women Fielding Danger
Negotiating Ethnographic
Identities in Field Research

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Gendered Observations: Activism, Advocacy, and the Academy

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Quitate el ropaje del pudor para decir con libertad y dejate guiar por el corazón.

—Grabe 2000, 12

This chapter is a meditation on the contradictions one confronts when conducting field research on violence and in ambient violence. How do ethics, scholarship, and the rights of communities collide? How do ethical obligations of the researcher shift in war zones and areas of ongoing conflict? How does this impact one's scholarship and one's own worldview? I begin at one of my beginnings with my personal experience working with Central American asylum seekers in the later 1980s during the U.S.-backed wars in Central America. The next beginning is with my master's research on the forced recruitment of Maya youth into the Guatemalan army. Here, I reflect on what it means to work with survivors who are both victims and victimizers. Next, I consider my field research on genocide in Guatemala, the relationship between researcher and survivor, how it feels to investigate crimes against humanity in ongoing ambient violence, and how one struggles to represent this type of research. I conclude this chapter with considerations about the different ways fieldwork on violence has affected me and also how it has carried me on to do new research in Colombia. I close with thoughts about the responsibility of academics conducting field research in violent places. These observations are gendered by my subject position as a woman who, borrowing words from my friend Michael Ondaatje, carries out research in war zones and writes about "a world normally depicted by men."²

"A TRUE WAR STORY IS NEVER MORAL"³

True war stories are full of contradictions for victims, survivors, perpetrators, bystanders, and, of course, for those of us who come along somewhere in the process to try to document and understand, whether as scholars or human rights activists. In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien writes, "You can tell a true war story if it embarrasses you. If you don't care for obscenity, you don't care for truth" (O'Brien 1990, 77). Since 1986 I have taken testimonies from survivors of the U.S.-backed wars of the 1980s in Central America. I began taking these testimonies for legal cases to represent Central American refugee claims for political asylum in the United States.⁴ When I think back on those first testimonies, I remember feeling embarrassed by the intimacy of the stories. The very personal references that were used by our clients to affirm the "truth" of their testimonies: "I didn't want anyone to see the marks of what they had done. The private places they had shocked me. I couldn't make love with my wife." I was shocked by the violations of dignity that we were forced to carry out by a legal system that refused to believe that Central Americans might flee their country with "reasonable fear for their lives"—the reasonable fear that is internationally recognized and indeed codified into the U.S. legal system as grounds for political asylum. Violations of dignity such as photographing the torture scars on the man who had never even let his wife see them. Three times this man had been detained and tortured by state forces.

We went to court with photographs of his scars and even newspaper articles documenting his disappearance, reappearance, and hospitalization in El Salvador. As the arbiter of truth, the immigration judge found the testimony and evidence of torture to be "credible." We sighed with relief, but too soon. The judge then ruled that our client had no reasonable fear for his life because if the security forces had wanted him dead, they had three opportunities to kill him. Asylum denied, and the war story of our client continued as we searched for safe haven for him. We told his story to different churches and sanctuary houses until we found a church to sponsor him, post a \$7,500 bond, and offer him safe (and illegal) haven while we awaited his appeal hearing. "You can tell a true war story if you just keep on telling it. . . . [A] true war story is never about war. . . . It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. . . and people who never listen" (O'Brien 1990, 91).

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF SURVIVAL

Inspired by my mentor Philippe Bourgois's field research in Central America and Spanish Harlem (Bourgois 1982, 1995), and encouraged by the possibilities of anthropological research presented in Carolyn Nordstrom's

Fieldwork Under Fire (1995), I began collecting testimonies of survival from young Maya men who were living as refugees in California.⁶ It turned out that the young men defied the neat categories of victim and victimizer because though they were massacre survivors, they had also been forcibly recruited into the Guatemalan army and had themselves committed abuses during the internal armed conflict that became a genocide taking the lives of more than two hundred thousand Guatemalans.⁷ I found it particularly difficult to listen to the stories of abuse, because these young men were my friends. We were friends before I began my master's research project. They were as protective of me as if I were their sister. I loved them as one loves a brother. Mateo was just eighteen years old and finishing high school in San Francisco. I was the *co-madrina* (godmother sponsor) for his prom. He would stare out the window as he recounted his life story to me. We met every Sunday for several months in an apartment belonging to a friend of mine, to avoid the interruptions of my family or his friends. Usually he would talk for two hours. Sometimes, he would talk for three or four hours. He would stand, staring out the window at the San Francisco Bay below as he described finding the mutilated body of his father in the mountains:

After the massacre in Pueblo Nuevo, we lived in the mountain. The army began to burn our homes and our people. They began to burn our animals. I cried because I saw our house burning. They destroyed all our crops. The corn, the beans, everything. They fired bullets. They threw grenades at my father's house. We were left with nothing. We returned to the jungle walking in a stream so we would leave no tracks for them to follow. The army killed my father in an ambush. He had gone to look for medicine because there were many sick people in our community. After the ambush, we all fled in different directions. It was two weeks before we could go back to look for my father.

I was very scared. I was nervous because I didn't know what it would be like to see my father dead. I was afraid from the moment we left. I felt like something bad was going to happen. The people were behind me, but I felt like I was being stalked. But I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything to my stepmother because she was nervous, too. When we arrived, I said, "This is my father's body."

He was in pieces and it made me very scared because I could see bits of his clothing and the things he had with him. Everything was in a path of blood. We didn't see his whole body. He was a puddle of blood. If his body had been more whole, I would have embraced my father. But all I could do was pick up the bones.

We had never seen anything like this. The people were watching to see if the army would come. So, we had to do everything in a hurry. There were frightening spirits there. There were haunted spirits there. Who knows if the spirit was devilish? I don't know. There was such fear there. There were flies and crows. There were hawks. They had been eating him. They had eaten a lot. The flies everywhere. The fear everywhere.

Many people died there. I lost my father. But really it was the children. I believe more little children died than adults. They died because of the cold and they died because they weren't well fed. The mothers didn't have any milk. So, they would give the baby water. Many died. Babies were born dead. Some were born alive, but in two weeks they would be dead. They did not have a great life. Every family lost some children. After my father was killed, I joined the guerrilla. I was a courier. I was eleven years old. (Sanford 2003d, 186-87)

After one year in the guerrilla, Mateo sought refuge in Mexico, where he stayed for two years until he returned to Guatemala. Though only fourteen years old, he was quickly recruited into the army-controlled civil patrols. Before his fifteenth birthday, he was recruited into the army. He described his experience:

Most of the recruits were indigenous, but there were also some ladino students. There were five instructors and they were in charge. They would hit us. Everyday they punished us. The punishment is very harsh. Sometimes they would hang us tied up very tightly to the bed. They would leave us like that for fifteen minutes. Then we would do fifty push-ups. Then, we would go outside and lay on the ground. We had to roll to the other side and back until we vomited. Then they would line us up and go down punching us in the stomach and knocking the air out of us. But by then it didn't hurt so much because we didn't have any food left in our stomachs.

I never said that it hurt because if you said that it hurt they would hit you more. Our training was called the Tiger Course. They explained to us, "You have to complete this course to become a real man." They would say, "You have to know a lot. You can become an important officer. You can order other people. But now you have to suffer three months. If you don't obey the rules, you can die."

There were indigenous recruits who didn't know anything. They didn't know any Spanish; they only spoke their language. The majority of recruits were indigenous. Those who didn't know Spanish had to learn. There were some who only liked to speak their language. They were separated from each other. You could be beaten for not speaking Spanish. Sometimes you got beaten just for looking at someone or something.

There were three recruits who deserted. They were caught on the border because all their hair was shaved off. They were put into an underground jail [a pit]. Each day, water and garbage was thrown on them. They weren't given anything to eat. They were in there for almost a month. They were brought into our classroom all tied up as an example of what happened when you desert. They were kept in that cell for three more months. Then they had to start training all over again.

We were taught to use weapons and practiced with live munitions. Some of the recruits died in training from bullets and others died from bombs. In the third month, they taught us how to beat campesinos and how to capture them. We practiced on each other. They gave us our machine guns. They said,

"It is better than a girlfriend. The machine gun is a jewel." The truth is that it is a pure jewel.

One day, they asked us if we liked our meal. They told us we had eaten dog. I never thought that it was dog. Some people had stomachaches and others vomited. They fed us dog so that we wouldn't be afraid because it would have been impossible for us to withstand everything. I changed a lot after eating dog. I wasn't afraid anymore. I just hated. I hated my compañeros. After three months, I was a very different person. I felt like a soldier.

When I was a soldier, I went to villages. Once I had to interrogate a woman. The woman didn't tell me anything, but she had to respect me because I was a soldier of the government and I had a gun. There was an officer behind me, watching me. I had to do it right because if you don't they beat you and sometimes they kill you. I interrogated the woman. So did some other soldiers. They beat her and I did, too. Sometimes they tell us, "Go get this person and beat him." A man was denounced by his neighbor. We beat him. He said, "I am just a campesino. I dedicate myself to working in the fields and nothing more." The man began to cry in front of us. I had to have such a face. I had to keep a tough face in front of the others because I had my orders and I was obligated to complete them. The man never said anything. The officer sent him to the base and I didn't see what happened to him after that.

The sub-lieutenant would ask the campesinos, "What have you been doing? What have you seen?" The campesinos would respond with their civil patrol titles. The sub-lieutenant would then ask them what they had seen. When they would respond that they had seen nothing, he would contradict them. He would lie and say that he had been told that subversives had been to the village. Then, the poor people would regret their answer and tell the sub-lieutenant, "Yes, we did see that." The army wants the people to give information that is untrue. The only thing that matters is that people will say whatever the army wants them to say. (Sanford 2003d, 187-88)

One day I realized that after particularly rough testimony Mateo would always calmly shift his gaze from the window, look down at me, and ask, "Should I continue?" I discovered that as the testimony moved along, I shifted from sitting on the couch to lying on the floor and would sometimes find myself in a fetal position. On this day, I sat straight up and asked him, "What do you think of this crazy gringa lying on the floor like this when you are sharing your testimony?" Shrugging his shoulders, he responded: "I think you are listening. I know it is difficult. Should I continue?"

While I met with Mateo on Sundays, I met with Gaspar on Tuesday evenings at my house. When Gaspar heard that I was taking testimony from Mateo, he approached me and asked me if I would listen to his story. "My story is different and more complicated," he told me. Indeed, the childhood he recounted to me was so horrible that it made me anxious for him to get to the story of his recruitment because I felt that at least I was prepared for his experiences in the army because I knew what to expect. Still, out of respect and because pre-recruitment experiences are extremely important to

Understanding individual experiences in the army, I listened carefully to his testimony of surviving a childhood of abuse. Gaspar told me:

My mother gave me to a finca owner when I was six. I cut coffee for several months until I could escape. I went back to my mother because when one is a child, you always look for the warmth of a mother's love. I never had that. My stepfather would get home drunk and beat my mother, my little sister, and me. He was very strong. He would knock me across the room and tell us that we were garbage because we were Indians, but my mother never wanted to leave him. Instead, she would give us away to another finca.

Once I asked a finca owner for shoes. She told me that my mother told her I didn't like shoes. She threatened me a lot and beat me. They put my food on the floor inside the house where the dogs ate. I wasn't allowed to sit at the table.

I tried to kill myself because I felt that life wasn't good enough, it just wasn't worth it for me. There was a place, a lagoon of water contaminated by the plane that fumigated the cotton. I decided to bathe myself in the lagoon to see if I could die. But I wasn't lucky. Ever since then, I have thought it was bad luck and bad luck follows me. All I got was a rash.

Then, my sister and I went to live with my half-sister in Guatemala City. She told us we were Indians. She was very prejudiced because her last name was Juarez Santos. I have scars on my head from her beating me with burning sticks. She was trying to rid herself of rage. She beat us a lot. Sometimes, she would leave us tied up all day. Sometimes, she wouldn't let us in the house to sleep at night. She left us on the streets. I lived with her for three years and I tried to kill myself. I drank a toxic liquid but didn't get any results. I ran away from her.

I lived in the streets of Guatemala City and ate what I could find. I survived digging through garbage, begging, and stealing. I tried glue and paint thinner, but I didn't like it because it made me vomit. It is because of the way people look at you when you live on the streets. They never know the real feelings we have. Even living on the streets, I still felt I could be someone someday. But the people look at you and say you're lost, worthless, the scum of society. It was out of desperation that my friend Carlos put a rope around his neck. Afterwards, I tried the same thing, but had no luck.

Then, I went back to Mazatenango and got a job collecting garbage. I gave the money I earned to my mother to help her, but she gave it to my stepfather and he beat us. I collected garbage in the day and went to school at night. I wanted to learn and improve myself. But in the class, they laughed at me. They said I came from garbage, that garbage made me. People stopped calling me Gaspar. At school and in my neighborhood, they called me garbage man. Even the teacher called me garbage man.

When I would say my name, they would laugh at me because my surname is indigenous. I even changed my name for a while. But it made no difference, I was Indian because of my features and because that is who I am, whether or not I want to be. This created great conflict in me and I began to see a division between what is ladino and what is indigenous. I was humiliated so much that

I began to hate ladinos. The hatred was so strong that I wanted a weapon. I wanted to kill my half-sister. (Sanford 2003d, 182-83)

We would sit at the kitchen table drinking tea or coffee, sometimes Gaspar asked for a glass of wine. Gaspar always arrived at exactly 7:00 p.m., and when it got close to 10 o'clock we would wrap up the testimony with a conversation about local Maya organizing or his construction work to shift the tenor of our conversation back to daily life. I would feel wasted when he left. I would feel empty, emotionally spent. I would shower and often weep under the flow of warm water. I remember one night when I felt that perhaps I couldn't continue to listen to Gaspar's testimony—that I was too overwhelmed and that I was unprepared to be supportive of him—my husband said, "I don't know what you talk about with Gaspar, but he looks happier every time he leaves here." So I continued to fumble through this intense and intimate testimony. I felt relief when he began to tell me about his recruitment because it represented the end of his miserable childhood.

The army was always recruiting in the park, at the cinema, and anywhere else where young men congregated. I always got away. I was good at slipping away because I had lived on the streets. I saw that the world was made up of abusers and abused and I didn't want to be abused anymore. So, one day when I was sixteen, I let the army catch me. But they didn't really catch me, because I decided I wanted to be a soldier. I didn't want to be abused anymore.

I wanted a chance to get ahead. I saw what the soldiers did. I knew they killed people. But I wanted to see if in reality it could really be an option for me. If there would be an opportunity to get ahead, to learn to read and write. I always thought that it would be very beautiful to learn to read and write. I was always looking for a way to get ahead, to improve myself, but sometimes the doors just close and there is nowhere else to go. The army says we will learn to read and write, but when you go into the army, they teach you very little. They give you a weapon and they teach you to kill. They give you shoes because you don't have any. Many times, you join the army for a pair of shoes. When they grab you to recruit you, they say, "You don't have any shoes."

In the army, I was full of hate. I used the weapons with the hatred I had carried inside of me for a long time. Even though the hatred can be strong, you are still a human being with the spirit of your ancestors, with the spirit of peace and respect. So, inside you have great conflict. It was very difficult for me to find an internal emotional stability.

When I was recruited, there were a lot of indigenas recruited. They were beaten hard and called "stupid Indians" for not knowing how to speak Spanish. The soldiers who beat them were indigenous. The problem in the army is that no one trusts anyone else, even though most of the soldiers are indigenous.

After I was recruited, they told me that I could be a Kaibit⁹ because I was tall, fast, and smart. But I wasn't so smart. They took us to the mountains. Each of us had to carry a live dog that was tied up over our shoulders. I was thirsty,

was no water. Well, we had no water and we were given no water. But inner had water. He walked ahead of us on the path spilling water to us of our thirst. I was innocent. When we were ordered to pick up the dogs on the street, I thought we were going to learn how to train them; would have guard dogs. But when we arrived to the camp, we were ordered to kill them with our bare hands. We had to kill some chickens, too. We ordered to butcher the chickens and dogs and put their meat and blood in a bowl. Then, we had to eat and drink this dog and chicken meat that a bath of blood. Whoever vomited had to vomit into the shared bowl and back in line to eat and drink more. We had to eat it all, including the until no one vomited.

This is how the army creates monsters. I become very hard in the mountains and sometimes the only thing you fear. You are afraid of any man, or every man. After my first battle with guerrilla, I decided to escape, because I wanted to improve myself and find no way to do it in the army. (Sanford 2003d, 183–84)

TRUTH AND "POISONOUS KNOWLEDGE"¹⁰

I expressed a deep commitment to truth about what had happened. When he came to my house, he would begin by saying, "I am going to tell everything. I am going to tell the truth. It is inhuman, but I will tell what they made us do." In his sharing of these memories, his stories always powerful, descriptive. I could see the place where the violence happened. I could hear the pleas of those who were injured or killed. I feel his disgust and hatred, and also the power he felt at the moment he told out these atrocities. Sometimes he would shake as he told me of experiences.

One evening, we had been speaking about violence in the Kaibiles. He had been talking about abuses and atrocities he had committed. We had been talking about institutionalized violence and impunity: the systematic violation of rights of Guatemalan men and women, the massacres of civilians and the torture of civilians. But on this particular night, in the midst of the story, he averted his gaze and began to speak in the third person. It was strange and convoluted story. It was after he fled the Kaibiles but was in Guatemala. He was on a bus in Guatemala City and ran into another Kaibil. They began to talk about their experiences as Kaibiles. This Kaibil told him (on the bus) about working with the death squads in Guatemala City. Gaspar recounted:

They were given the name and address of a young woman—a subversive, or wife or daughter of a subversive. Their job was to stalk her and grab her, take her away to a desolate location where they would torture her and gang-rape her. Sometimes they mutilated the girl and left her for dead. Sometimes they cut off her breasts and mutilated her genitals. They never felt any pity for what they did because these girls were subversives, I don't know what they did.

"I don't know what they did." It is taped on a cassette and transcribed. It is also recorded in my memory. Gaspar didn't know what the girls did? Or what the death squads did? When he said, "I don't know what they did," he also startled himself because he had slipped back in to speaking in the first person. Though I knew as he told this convoluted story that he had not had this conversation on a bus in Guatemala City and that he was recounting something that in his mind was so important that it had to be recounted, if only in the third person, because it was too horrible for him to admit to me that he had done it—or perhaps even admit to himself. I myself was struggling to locate him. "I don't know what they did." "I don't know what they did." He was there when this was done. He helped grab the young women. He saw them raped. It wasn't until he said, "I don't know what they did" that I could also locate him as a perpetrator who felt no pity in the moment of committing a crime against humanity but as he tells the story admits in retrospect that he doesn't know what they did. Visibly shaken by telling me this story, Gaspar looked at me like a child who might just have been caught in a lie. "It comes down to gut instinct," writes Tim O'Brien. "A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (1990, 84).

Despite my own revulsion and gut reaction that he was talking about himself and not some other Kaibil who told him a story on a bus, I felt protective of him. I felt pity for him. He was my friend. Each time he came to my house, he would spend a few minutes with my ninety-seven-year-old grandmother. He was a gentle man with aspirations of being an artist. He was also a key activist in the Guatemalan refugee community who would be absolutely ostracized if I shared this particular story with anyone—even as told in the third person—and Gaspar knew this as well. Forced recruitment, understood in the community. Pushing a racist ladino Kaibil off a cliff, understood. Forced participation in army maneuvers, mostly understood. Member of a death squad, absolutely not acceptable under any circumstances. This is the first time I write about this experience in the taking of his testimony that took place more than twelve years ago. And I only write it today because I know that Gaspar is no longer living in California and lives far away from the life he had in San Francisco in the early 1990s. Still, it must also be remembered that Gaspar, like so many others, gave his testimony so that it would be shared with a larger public. It was my decision, not his, to wait more than a decade to share this particular part of his testimony.

I asked Gaspar how his friend had felt about raping, mutilating, and disappearing these young women. He said, "The thing is that you cannot feel anything when you are a Kaibil or they kill you. He didn't feel anything. Well, I imagine that he didn't feel anything." He looked down at the table for a moment, then he looked me in the eyes and said, "I believe he must feel terrible about this now. I imagine that he lives and relives all of this evil. Even if you want to escape it, leave it behind and forget it, it comes to you in your dreams and you wake up sweating. Yes, I imagine he still suffers for what he did because it was wrong and he would know that now." I vomited when he left my house.

The following Sunday, Mateo continued to give his testimony. He was finishing up his time in the army. The next part of his testimony would be about walking from Guatemala to California and his experience as a fifteen-year-old undocumented refugee. In a certain way, this part of the testimony would be the "inspirational" part, because here was a valiant young man who had suffered through so much of the violence in Guatemala and whose life history seemed to embody Guatemala's history of violence and here he was finishing high school in San Francisco, California.

When I take testimonies, I explain at the very beginning that I am trying to understand the violence that happened in the person's life. I told Mateo I wanted to know about *La Violencia* in his life. How was his life before? How did the violence arrive in his community? What happened? I explained that I don't use real names and asked what pseudonym I should use. I explained that I wanted Mateo to tell me his story and that I would not interrupt him. I would write down my questions and wait until the end to ask new questions or clarify points he made.

Mateo had finished his testimony about his time in the army. So I began to follow up with small questions. I went from the small to the specific, then from his individual experience to more generalized patterns of military actions in communities. We began to discuss patterns of army abuse in villages. Though hesitant about becoming an interrogator, I felt I had to ask about the raping of women in attacks on villages. I said, "I have heard that it was a common army practice to gang-rape indigenous women during military actions in villages. Did this happen when you were patrolling villages?" Mateo looked cornered by my question. He took a deep breath, refocused his gaze out the window and responded, "I was very young. I didn't really understand what was going on. I didn't want to participate. I would hold them down while the other soldiers raped them." When I asked him what happened to these women after they were raped, without looking at me, he responded mechanically, "We shot them."

For both Mateo and Gaspar, fear and the desire for truth and justice emanated from the same past, and I never knew whether fear or the desire for truth and justice would weigh in more heavily on any given day. Each had

been a victim of *La Violencia*. Each had also been a victimizer. Anthropologist Veena Das (2000) has suggested that "if one's way of being-with-others was brutally injured, then the past enters the present not necessarily as traumatic memory but as poisonous knowledge" (221). It was the unpredictability of this "poisonous knowledge" that shaped each day for Mateo and Gaspar. And after each testimony, I was left to sort out the meaning of this poisonous knowledge not only for my research and human rights in Guatemala, but for myself in my life and my own understanding of the world.

FIELD RESEARCH ON GENOCIDE

As an anthropology graduate student at Stanford University and a research consultant for the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, I took more than four hundred testimonies from Maya survivors of Guatemalan army massacres (see Sanford 2003d). I continued to take testimonies as I completed *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (2003d) and *Violencia y Genocidio en Guatemala* (2003c). In the broad stroke, my work clearly shows the calculated and systematic way in which the Guatemalan army carried out three different phases of genocide against the Maya which led to 626 known massacres and more than 200,000 dead or disappeared.¹¹ One key to this genocide was the systematic incorporation of Maya men into Guatemalan army-controlled civil patrols (also known as PACs). For the majority rural Maya, participation in the PACs was required for personal and familial security and performed under duress. Even a 1990 U.S. State Department memo noted, "Credible reports say that those who refuse to serve in the civil patrols have suffered serious abuse, including death" (Jay 1990, 23). These PACs played a key role in local repression and massacres of neighboring communities.

In its comprehensive investigation, the CEH (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico—Commission for Historical Clarification [Guatemalan truth commission]) found that 18 percent of human rights violations were committed by civil patrols. Further, it noted that 85 percent of those violations committed by patrols were carried out under army order.¹² It is not insignificant that the CFH found that one out of every ten human rights violations was carried out by a military commissioner and that, while these commissioners often led patrols in acts of violence, 87 percent of the violations committed by commissioners were in collusion with the army.¹³

In 1995 there were 2,643 civil patrol units organized and led by the army. In August 1996, when the demobilization of civil patrols was begun, there were some 270,906 mostly Maya peasants registered in civil patrols.¹⁴ This is significantly fewer than the 1 million men who were organized into civil patrols in 1981. Taking into account the population at the time and

adjusting for gender and excluding children and elderly, this means that in 1981, one out of every two adult men in Guatemala was militarized into the army-led civil patrols.¹⁵

One afternoon, I was talking with a group of indigenous men in one of the communities where I had worked for several years. They were talking about their different experiences in the army, PAC, and guerrilla. I remember thinking to myself, *Every one of these men has carried weapons in this war and most likely used them.* The apparently simplistic life of small, rural villages is absolutely ruptured by the complexities of violence. Within communities, people know who did what, who gave up whom, who sacrificed someone else or even used the violence for personal enrichment—these are Holocaust historian Daniel Goldhagen's (1996, 67) "ordinary" citizens¹⁶ who become "willing executioners." I stopped myself from imagining my friends with weapons, receiving orders that could not be refused.

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

THE RHYTHM OF MEMORY

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

their torture, loss, and survival. As Elaine Scarry (1985) notes: "[A]cts that restore the voice become not only a denunciation of the pain but almost a diminution of the pain, a partial reversal of the process of torture itself" (50). The taking of testimony teaches one to listen and to listen carefully. And this careful listening draws survivors to give testimony.

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

In her work on Argentina's Dirty War, Marguerite Feitlowitz (1998) makes clear that "testimony fulfills the sacred obligation to bear witness, and however discomfiting it may be for us, our pain, though great, is minor compared with that of the victims" (50). Still, sometimes, one no longer wants to hear. When I lived in Guatemala in 1996 and 1997 doing research on massacres, I used to flee from the villages because I felt I could not bear the weight of one more story. "Aren't you overwhelmed?" I asked Julia, my translator, after the fourteenth testimony on a particularly cold, damp day in Nebaj as I looked out at the line of survivors still waiting to give testimony. "Of course, Victoria," she responded. "But they want to talk and who else will listen?" And even when I fled to the city, I never left alone. Because I had a vehicle, I would give rides to people wanting to travel to Guatemala City. And because I lived in a spacious house with a partner who didn't mind if I filled it with my friends from the villages where I worked, I would also offer housing to my friends who ostensibly had some medical, legal, or bureaucratic item to attend to in the capital. But they didn't travel to Guatemala City to take care of such business; they traveled to my house in the capital because they wanted to keep talking, to continue giving testimonies of survival. It was not unusual for people to take buses (more than ten hours from Nebaj to Guatemala City at the time) to visit me in the capital in order to "add to my testimony because I remembered something else important."

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

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

RESEARCH IN AMBIENT VIOLENCE

In October 2000 I went to Colombia for the first time. In Bogotá I was invited to give a public talk about human rights in Guatemala at the Colombian Commission of Jurists. Among those attending my talk was a journalist. She approached me at the end and asked if I might be interested in meeting with a group of women who were former M-19 combatants and some of whom had been guerrilla commanders.¹⁸ Fabulous. I told her I would be delighted. I met with the women and the journalist. The women spoke about their current political projects for peace in Colombia. Despite the double stigma of insurgency and the danger their armed participation presented to traditional patriarchal structures, many demobilized M-19 women combatants today dedicate their lives to peacemaking in Colombia. At one point as these former combatants shared their contemporary struggles for peace and human rights, the journalist said, "But this is very dangerous because they are still killing demobilized M-19. They could kill you for doing this and especially knowing who you

are." La Negra¹⁹ responded, "Yes, they could kill me. I was willing to die for the revolution and now I am willing to die for peace. The only difference is that now I am not armed."

Out of this group meeting came a packed schedule of individual meetings with these former combatants who wanted to give testimony about their life experiences. Moreover, these women wanted to come back for second and third meetings to continue talking. Dora brought a recorder so that she could also tape her testimony. In 1998 former M-19 commander Maria Eugenia Vasquez Perdomo received the Premio Nacional de Testimonio (National Award for Testimony) for her autobiography *Escrito para morir—Bitácora de una militancia* that was published by the Ministry of Culture in 2000. Former M-19 commander Vera Grabe published her critically acclaimed memoir *Razones de Vida* (2000) that same year. Grabe's memoir takes the form of a letter to her daughter, born during Grabe's militancy in M-19. Grabe writes: "[T]he heart guides with wisdom and leads to explanations and nuances. And as the poets and *boleros* say: if you know how to listen, you won't be fooled." She explains that she takes the risk of writing this memoir out of "love for the friends who didn't worry about writing their life stories because they risked and lost their lives for us." She writes, "For love of those things that make life worth living."²⁰ Vasquez Perdomo (2000) writes: "When a person narrates her life and others listen to her or read her life, the protagonist feels like she exists: she feels. If only for this reason, this is enough for me to begin" (13). The critical and popular success of these two memoirs in Colombia indicates that just as survivors and protagonists want to share their testimonies, there is a public anxious to listen and read about these experiences.

FEAR AND SORROW

Fear

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

curiosity about this apparently docile creature. Forensic team members called her my “secret weapon” because rural Maya peasants were fascinated by her size and apparent docility. They would ask how I trained the coyote. I would explain that she is a German shepherd, not a coyote, and that there are breeds of dogs, just as there are breeds of chickens. Inevitably, it would be collectively agreed in Ixil, Achi, K’iche’, or K’ekchi that Asha is a coyote and that I don’t know it because I am a gilinga.²¹ Maybe because I had the dog, I was never afraid. Or maybe I felt a bit safer and that at least with Asha I would have warning if someone approached in the night. Perhaps I was in denial. Or perhaps my fear was simply overwhelmed by other emotions. In Guatemala, more than fear, I felt sorrow. I lived in sorrow taking testimonies from survivors.

The Acul massacre was but one of seventy-nine massacres carried out in the department of El Quiché in 1981. These massacres and others like them were a part of the Guatemalan army’s first campaign of genocide against the Maya.²² Describing the aftermath of the army massacre when fathers were forced to bury their massacred sons, Don Sebastián said, “It fills my heart with sorrow.” He recounted, “Then [after the massacre], they asked us, ‘What have you observed here? What is it that you have seen?’ We did not answer them because we knew that they had killed our sons. We just didn’t respond.” The soldiers did. They said, “You don’t answer us because you don’t take good care of your sons. These sons of yours are involved with the guerrilla. That’s why you don’t answer us. Now, you’ve seen the dead. You have to return to your homes. You must go tranquil. Go home and eat, relax, and sleep. Don’t do anything. You have done good work here. Go home. Go home tranquil.”

Sorrow

Don Sebastián was sobbing; he nearly shouted, “But we are not tranquil. We are sad. We went home, but we didn’t eat. We are crying. We are not content because we know what they have done. They have killed our sons. I couldn’t eat for more than a month.” He doubles over, burying his face in his hands between his knees. Still rocking his body, his sobs dwindle to whispers. I turn off my tape recorder. Without a word, Julia and I stand, then crouch, on either side of Don Sebastián. We half embrace him, half caress his back. I can feel each rib, each vertebrae. He is so thin. Powerlessly, I whisper, “*Lo siento*” (I am sorry). Julia says, “*No es justo. Sufimos mucho. Todos sufimos*” (It is not just. We suffered a lot. We all suffered). He lifts his head out of his hands. His hand, callused hands pat our arms. He gains composure as he comforts us. “I am still not finished,” he says, almost in apology. “There is still more. I want to tell more” (Sanford 2003d, 93–94).

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

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

Laurence Langer (1991) has written extensively about the relationship between the witness and the person giving testimony. His work studying Holocaust survivor testimonies on video revealed a number of interviewer/witnesses who sought to curtail continued testimony when it became discomfiting for the interviewer or failed to meet the interviewer’s expectation of “heroic memory.” Dominick LaCapra’s (2001, 78) work on witnessing, trauma, and history indicates that a type of transference takes place between the interviewer/witness and the survivor. He concludes that the form this transference takes has much to do with interpretation. LaCapra also suggests that for the study of trauma, it is essential for the researcher to acknowledge this transference because failure to do so has serious, and perhaps unintended, consequences in one’s continued research and analysis.²³ In many ways, writing *Buried Secrets* was a meditation upon this transference. And it is a meditation that continues as I take up new projects and expand upon previous projects in Guatemala while pursuing new, comparative projects in Colombia. As writing is always a temporal and provisional project, I sometimes think of new and different ways I would frame my own presence in *Buried Secrets*. If I were to write *Buried Secrets* now, here is how I would begin the book:

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

For me, the *susto* was physical and spiritual. Borrowing from Don Sebastián’s testimony, my heart was filled with sorrow. In Western terms, you

right want to call it secondary trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder. But after having struggled for two years following my field research to work out of my body and soul, I think *susto* is a better description of the effect my field research had on me. *Buried Secrets* was my therapy, my exit, my act of bearing witness, the fulfillment of my sacred obligation to those who trusted me with their testimonies. So I have always felt a little perplexed when people have asked me if I was afraid, because I never really felt fear or myself in Guatemala. Those with reason to be afraid have always been the courageous *campesinos* (peasants) in isolated villages that continue to risk their lives for truth and justice.

NEW GEOGRAPHIES OF VIOLENCE

In a random encounter with a local peace activist who lives in a paramilitary-dominated barrio in Colombia, we had a conversation about forced recruitment of youth by the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia/Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the paramilitaries. "You are going to write a book about this, right?" he asked. I told him I was writing articles and would write a book in the future. He said, "It would be useful to talk to a paramilitary youth, no?" "Of course," I responded. "But I can't really go around announcing that I want to write a book and would like to interview paramilitary youth about their experiences. That would cause some problems." He then told me that his best friend in the barrio—his best friend since he was nine years old—had just recently joined the paramilitaries. He had been in the paramilitaries for three months and was home on his first leave. His friend was still *de confianza*. Jonathan thought he might be able to ask him to meet with me. Would I be interested? It would all be clandestine. They would come to my hotel room. So that our conversation would not be overheard, we would put the air conditioner on full blast as well as the television while we talked. I trusted this peace activist, so I agreed to interview his friend if the meeting could be arranged.

When they came to the hotel, the woman at the reception desk called with a very serious voice. Instead of the usual courteous announcement that "Señor so and so is here to see you," she said in a very ominous voice, "They have come for you." When I went downstairs to meet the peace activist and the paramilitary, she motioned with her eyes that I shouldn't take them upstairs to my room. But this is a paramilitary-dominated town, so when I smiled at her as we went upstairs, she simply shook her head and returned to her work. The paramilitary, Marlon, was nineteen years old.²⁴ He had the close-shaven hair and wore the fitted jeans and polo-type shirt that is the out-of-uniform uniform of the paramilitaries. He was tall, slender, muscular, and handsome. He entered my hotel room cautiously. I noticed that he

checked the empty bathroom as we walked by it. The room was small, with two twin beds. They sat on one and I sat on the other, across from them. Jonathan explained that this was a confidential meeting and that whatever was said would not be attributed to Marlon's real name and that Marlon would not tell anyone about the meeting either—thus making it clear that it was a dangerous meeting for all present. I asked if I could tape-record the meeting. Marlon agreed, but was then somewhat hesitant to speak. "I haven't really talked about this with anyone. I don't know where to start. Why don't you ask me some questions?" he suggested. I asked him how the paramilitaries recruit in the barrios: "It's not as if they have posters up inviting you to join them," I said. "Yes, they do have posters all over the barrio," responded Marlon. "There is one with a really beautiful girl paramilitary. The paramilitaries can have whatever girls they want." Marlon explained how the paramilitaries recruit and how he joined. Then, he explained his "job" as a paramilitary.

I had no opportunities until one day a friend of mine said, "Come on, let's go join them." As soon as we got there, they gave us camouflage uniforms, rifles, new guns, and other equipment. "Those who had no army training went into training. We had been in the army so we went right into operations, which means we went to the mountain to fight the enemy. Who is the enemy? In vulgar terms, the guerrilla. We are enemies, we are in conflict. We are also on the margin of the law. We were taken by helicopter and we began to look for the guerrilla. We started looking in every way among the *campesinos* (peasants). The *campesinos* help the guerrilla, so sometimes we have to grab them. Grab them means to kill them. We would ask them if they had seen the guerrilla. First, they say, "no." But then they see that we are going to grab them and torture them, so they say, "yes." And then we have to kill them. They have to respect us because we wear the symbol that says A-U-C: Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia.

When we kill a *campesino*, it is because there are really few displaced people. What there are [among the displaced] are a lot of guerrilla infiltrators who are very astute and intelligent. When the people know we are coming, they flee; they abandon their communities. We think they do this because they are working with the enemy and they are afraid we will do something to them when we catch them. (Monedto, p. 142)

We have two kinds of helicopters that back up our platoon. They arrive with help and this gives us a lot of support. There is a small helicopter that we call the cricket and large one we call the papaya. Sometimes innocent civilians die because there are some zones that have a lot of guerrilla. Where we work, we are the police because for the people there, it is normal to work with the guerrilla. There may be only 12 police and 1,500 guerrilla in the zone. So, when we arrive, if someone tells us that these people are guerrilla collaborators, then we have to eliminate them. Once, some *campesinos* told some others when we got to their community. We didn't want the guerrilla to know that we were

there, so we had to kill them with machetes, chop them up piece by piece, and bury them. (Sanford 2003a, 3–4)

When the autodefensas (AUC) kill a campesino that lives in a village, it is because we have been given information that this person is guerrilla and that is why we have to eliminate him. But we always say, “nada debe, nada teme” (one who owes nothing, fears nothing). We don’t kill anyone without authorization. . . . Sometimes it was painful for me when we got to a town and the civilians would be praying, because I have my family. But they give you an order and you have to carry it out; there is nothing else you can do. I am a patroller and surely, when a commander tells a patroller “kill this civilian,” I really cannot ask him why. No, I simply have to do what he tells me to do. And if a higher up patron asks me, “And you, why did you kill this civilian?” Then, I just tell him, “Because my commander ordered me.” Then, he can work it out with my commander. So, I just have to follow orders. Because one goes there to kill or one is killed, right?

The AUC has a lot of people because we are everywhere in Colombia. There are people from outside who are not Colombian; I imagine this is because the AUC is just so big. Human rights are a problem because we can’t grab 30 people and kill them all at once because that would be a massacre. We are being squeezed by human rights. Now we can’t massacre everyone; we have to kill them one by one, one by one. This is a war that Carlos Castaño announced and it is not over. This is a civil war. This is a war without end. If you make a mistake, you pay with your life. I do not wish this work on anyone.²⁵

One of the big differences for me listening to Marlon’s testimony was that, unlike Mateo and Gaspar’s testimonies of abuses, Marlon was talking about atrocities that he had committed just ten days earlier and would continue to do when his leave ended the following week. I couldn’t believe he was telling me these stories. Then I realized that he was talking as if I wasn’t even there, as if Jonathan wasn’t even there. He was verbalizing his experience for the first time. He was processing his own “poisonous knowledge.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

As an anthropologist in the field, Marlon’s experience is not the lens through which I see Colombia; it is a point of epiphany. It is a naked encounter with humanity’s dark side. In fact, it seems to me that the practice of fieldwork is a spiritual experience with nakedness, where the disciplined “normal” becomes out of place and thus challenges the anthropologist (or anyone else in the field) to begin to peel the onion—that is, to begin to make sense of one’s own self and the many daily acts and interpretations that customarily guide one through daily life. Fieldwork displaces structures of understanding and disorients trajectories of meaning.

In her film and book *Framer Framed* (1992), Trinh Minh-ha says/writes on and about truth: “Being truthful: being in the in-between of all definitions of truth” (13); “Really and Truth: neither relative nor absolute” (25); “Interview: an antiquated device of documentary. Truth is selected, renewed, displaced and speech is always tactical” (73); “Of course, the image can neither prove what it says nor why it is worth saying it; the impotence of proofs, the impossibility of a single truth in witnessing, remembering, recording, rereading” (83). Trinh’s interrogation of truth touches off much of what I believe is problematic in representation on the intellectual level, but also on the emotional level. For me, this is finding internal balance, rather than shutting down, as I dig and pull bones out of the mass graves before the relatives of victims, witness the sixteenth testimony of survival of the day or listen to a nineteen-year-old paramilitary confess his fears of death without acknowledging the fears of those he kills and tortures.

Trinh’s “in-between” space is a place for recognition of my own limitations and contradictions even when I cannot name them; somehow keeping sight of the tactics of my own research and agenda, and not forgetting that others have their own. Sometimes, as in the case of the Marlon’s, Mateo’s, or Gaspar’s experiences, it is easier to fill in the outline of my own agenda than it is to recognize that while I might very well be able to demonstrate the validity of my hypothesis, that this hypothesis may very well have little to do with the daily lives and needs of the communities in which I work—perhaps that is another of the “in-between of all definitions of truth.” Of course, it is wholly paternalistic and/or naive to believe that those who provide information do not also have their own agendas. It is not, however, an attempt to somehow measure the sincerity or honesty of those interviewed; nor is it a relativistic position.

The hidden frame for many discussions about truth in fieldwork, particularly with indigenous populations, is the underlying assumption of the “noble savage.” This was the case when on one occasion in Guatemala when Padre Luis told me that the Achi Maya do not desire revenge (which they collectively told me they did when I asked the surviving men of the Plan de Sanchez massacre what they wanted from the exhumation of massacre victims). A leader of an international human rights mission in Guatemala once commented, “The problem with these people is that they aren’t yet civilized.” In Colombia, an international human rights worker told me that Black Colombians lacked sexual morality, while a U.S. academic commented on the “predatory sexuality” she sensed when talking with Black Colombian youth. The hidden frame behind these comments is infused with racism and also assumes the “wily Indian,” “unpredictable savage,” or “sexual deviant” stereotype when an indigenous Guatemalan or Black Colombian shares an experience that somehow counters the

"respected authority." Thus, the indigenous Guatemalan or Black Colombian is "suspect" and must be lying, laying a trap, or has been duped by the "bad guys" and therefore is not authentic because the experts and/or the outside anthropologist better know who truly represents the Guatemalan Maya or Afro-Colombian communities, their hidden desires, and what "these people need."

How can an outsider ever hope to understand, much less convey, a level of terror so great that neighbors massacre neighbors and the exhuming of skeletal remains feels like a celebration of peace, a resurrection of faith, an excavation of the heart, an act of love? In such circumstances, it is easy to romanticize the Maya and Afro-Colombian communities and cultures as "other," as "exotic," as somehow having a different level of tolerance in the face of violence based on cultural difference and hundreds of years of structural marginalization. One of the women interviewed in the video *Surname Vietnam* said, "[T]o glorify us is, in a way, to deny our human limits" (Trinh 1992, 72). It seems that oftentimes, in attempts to encapsulate a culture, anthropologists seek to categorize and compartmentalize, rather than problematize, experience. This is particularly dangerous when one seeks to reveal truths about violence and survival, for it is a slippery slope to reifying survival, difference, and terror, and thereby eliminating all possibilities for understanding (see Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006). Advocacy and activism, if not the initial impetus for research in war zones, are its inevitable outcome when one achieves an understanding of the lived experience of violence and survival. It is not uncommon within the academy for lived experience to be dismissed as unscientific or not relevant to real, objective scholarship. This is completely backwards because it is the academy that needs to be relevant to the reality of lived experience. Advocacy and activism do not diminish the validity of one's scholarly research. On the contrary, activist scholarship reminds us that all research is inherently political—even, and perhaps especially, that scholarship presented under the guise of "objectivity," which is really no more than a veiled defense of the status quo.

NOTES

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2. Michael Ondaatje, endorsement of *Buried Secrets*, jacket cover, 2003. See also Ondaatje 2000.
3. O'Brien 1990, 76
4. I was the founding director of Oakdale Legal Assistance, a refugee legal program providing free legal services to asylum seekers and refugees from Central America.
5. Philippe Bourgois has been my adviser and mentor since I was a master's student at San Francisco State University. Carolyn Nordstrom (1995, 2004) also became a role model and mentor early in my career. I first called her at Philippe's suggestion. It was the day before she left for Mozambique for one year. She spent more than an hour talking with me about my impending field research in Guatemala and sharing her field experiences. She continues to be an inspiration.
6. All names used here are pseudonyms.
7. See Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH) 1999.
8. *Ladino* is a term used to connote the non-Maya in Guatemala.
9. Kaibiles are the elite fighting forces of the Guatemalan army.
10. See Veena Das (2000) for this term.
11. See CEH 1999.
12. CEH 1999, vol. 2, 226–27.
13. CEH 1999, vol. 2, 181.
14. CEH 1999, vol. 2, 234.
15. CEH 1999, vol. 2, 226–27.
16. See also Browning 1992.
17. *La Violencia* is the term people use in Guatemala to refer to the time of the genocide.
18. M-19 (Movimiento 19 de abril) was a popular armed insurgent movement that began in the 1970s and disbanded after signing peace accords in March 1990.
19. *La Negra* is a nickname.
20. Grabe 2000, 12.
21. The word *gringa/a* is used, often contemptuously, to refer to North Americans from the United States. It can also be used as a term of endearment or to connote innocence or inexperience with life in rural communities. Thus, it is used to explain why the *gringa* doesn't know she has a coyote, can't cross the river or scale the cliff very quickly, makes tortillas like a child, and can't wring water out of her jeans or towels when hand-washing in the river, but can four-wheel drive.
22. For more on genocide in Guatemala, see *Buried Secrets* (2003d) and *Violencia y Genocidio en Guatemala* (2003c).
23. See also LaCapra 1998.
24. Marlon is a pseudonym.
25. On Colombian Peace Communities, see Sanford 2004b. See also Sanford 2003b, 2.

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6

Human Rights in East Timor: Advocacy and Ethics in the Field

Lynn Fredriksson

We knew from the south zone that the Indonesians had dropped four napalm bombs there. Then they dropped two of these on us. I saw all the flames and heard people shouting and screaming. Some of us set out straight away to help those people. . . . There was nothing but ash and burnt rocks in the whole area, but we had heard those people screaming.¹

This chapter is grounded in my experience as interviewer, observer, and witness² in East Timor, first in 1997 when East Timor was under Indonesian occupation, then in 2000 when it was newly freed from Indonesian occupation, and in 2002 when Timor Leste had become an independent nation. Using intersections of my own biography and East Timor's recent history, I have divided this chapter into five parts and a conclusion. The chapter's first four sections chronicle my work in the field within East Timor's changing international status—"Situating Researcher and Place," "East Timor and Research under Occupation—1997," "East Timor Immediate Postoccupation—2001," and "Timor Leste: Academic as Researcher in Independent Nation—2002." The chapter's fifth section, "Deconstructing Fieldwork Ethics," and its conclusion, "The Choices We Make," revisit the ethical and personal dilemmas and issues identified throughout this chapter—subterfuge, safety, "seduction," taking sides (or not), and managing the emotional "scars" of violence. Dilemmas and dangers assumed different forms at each intersection of my biography and East Timor's recent history. For example, when I was conducting collaborative human rights research in East Timor (1997 and 2000), many dilemmas were associated with guaranteeing my own safety and the safety of my human