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*Truth, Memory, and Representation*



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# 1      WHAT IS AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF GENOCIDE?

Reflections on Field Research with Maya Survivors in Guatemala

Genocide is a problem not only of war but also of peace.

—Raphaël Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*

This essay draws on the work of Dominick LaCapra (2001) and Primo Levi (1989) to consider the limits of memory and the challenges of anthropological research on genocide. In particular, I borrow Levi's concept of the "grey zone" to consider the lived experiences of Maya youth who were both victims and victimizers in the Guatemalan genocide. Based on more than a decade of field research on the exhumations of clandestine cemeteries of Maya massacre victims,<sup>1</sup> I consider the excavation of individual and collective memory as a cultural and political act of community reconstruction. I suggest that both the accretion of truth and political space in the exhumation of clandestine cemeteries are central to the processes of reclaiming cultural memory and of contesting dominant metanarratives that negate subaltern subjectivity and buttress official histories of denial. I trace political agency and the development of new subjectivities in Maya communities over time. I ask, "What is an anthropology of genocide?" to provide a framework for my reflections on field research with Maya survivors of genocide. It is my hope that this framework is useful for reflecting on field

research on genocide and violence in other contexts (see also Strathern, Stewart, and Whitehead 2006; Riches 1991). This essay is my modest attempt to share both the survivor memories and the challenge they present to the researcher in the field who, while overwhelmed by the sensation of their immediacy and sorrow, seeks to understand the lived experiences of survivors in such a way that they might make sense to survivors, researchers, and readers.

#### THE LIMITS OF MEMORY AND RESEARCH

The Auschwitz survivor Levi wrote: "It is natural and obvious that the most substantial material for the reconstruction of truth about the camps is the memories of the survivors" (1989:16). Holding this same belief in the value of testimony a half century later and on a different continent, the Guatemalan anthropologist Ricardo Falla lived with survivors of Guatemalan army massacres who were still in flight from army attacks in the northern Ixcán region of the country.<sup>2</sup> While he accompanied Maya survivors in their hardship, he took their testimonies of survival. In 1992 Falla published *Masacres de la selva* based on some 700 testimonies. That same year I completed a yearlong project of taping the life history of Mateo, a Mam Maya child survivor of the Ixcán massacres, who had been recruited by the guerrillas, the civil patrols, and the army before reaching the age of 15. At the time of our project, Mateo was a 19-year-old refugee attending high school in San Francisco. Falla documented two survival stories that are of interest for our consideration of the limits of memory and of the challenge of research on genocide.<sup>3</sup> Mateo had never met Falla, nor had he read his work, yet he gave similar testimony regarding these two survivor stories.

Falla's witness remembers:<sup>4</sup>

An 8-year-old girl survived because they tied a rope around her neck and tightened it, "they saw the tongue coming out of the girl and thought she was dead." An old man of 75 was cut in the neck by the soldiers, and he also lived because "the knife got stuck on a button in his shirt, and the soldiers thought they had hit the bone and there was blood, so they kicked him and left him for dead." A couple and their baby girl also survived. They threw themselves into the river from a bridge. She was carrying the baby of 1½ years and the woman was hit by a bullet from

the bridge, but she did not die, neither did her baby. "God is great," says the witness, because these five survived. (1992:57)

Mateo remembers what was recounted to his family by the survivors:

The army arrived to another center very close to our village. The people were at church praying. The soldiers surrounded the church, doused it with gas, and burned it with the people inside. Other families were burned too because the church was built with carton and palms and close to some other little, palm houses. So they caught fire and burned as well. There were about 10 families and the army captured them and put them into a line.

My father's compadre and comadre were in this line. One-by-one, the army would grab each person in line, beat them and ask them questions. The soldiers beat the campesinos and they killed them. But my father's compadre was old. They tied him up and they stabbed him three times in the neck and they cut him in other places, too. But because he was so old, his skin didn't break enough. First the soldiers were mad because he didn't die. Then when he looked bad off, they said, "Now, he is dead." Then, they threw him in a hole. He stayed there.

Next, the soldiers took his daughter and they tortured her with a rope. They put a rope around her neck and pulled the ends of the rope until they thought she was dead, too. Then, they threw her in the same hole. They told us later that the army left them there for dead.

Behind them, were some other friends waiting their turn. He was very religious and was with his wife and baby girl, maybe she was one year old. The baby was crying. The father said, "Why don't we pray? Let's give ourselves to God because our time has arrived. Only a few more people and it will be our turn and they will kill us." The soldiers were shouting, "This is what we are going to do to everyone!" They were killing people and chopping them up. They cut them up with machetes and they tortured them and raped the women.

So the man and woman gave themselves to God and as they were praying an idea occurred to them. They were very close to the river which was running very high because it was winter. The man said to the woman in their language, "Let's leave. We will try to escape and if they kill us, it is worth it because we will die from bullets. Because if they kill us like they are killing the other people, we are going to suffer a

lot. We have seen how they are dying. They are going to kill us just like them.”

They decided to escape and cross the river. Even if they drowned in the river, they would still suffer less. So they gave themselves to God because they had great faith. They had faith. He grabbed his wife's hand and they ran. When they reached the river, the army was firing at them. But as the family reached the water's edge, the river lowered its water and the family passed to freedom. When they reached the other side of the river, the water rose again.

The soldiers were chasing them, trying to catch them, and firing bullets. When the water rose again, it drowned some soldiers. But the family was safe on the other side. It was a miracle of God because they had faith in God and because no one else can lower the river. They came to our house at six in the morning because they were like family for us. The old man came with his daughter because he was my father's comadre. (Sanford 1993)

While Falla's witness corroborates Mateo's testimony, together Falla's witness and Mateo raise a number of issues about the limits of memory and of research on genocide. First, only the five survivors and the soldiers who committed the atrocities know exactly what happened because they are the only witnesses to this particular massacre. Second, everyone tries to make sense of terror in his or her own way. Falla's witness believes the man survived because a button protected him, while Mateo believes it was the old man's leathery skin that stopped the knife from getting down to the bone. Massacres are not neat enterprises. Perhaps it was a button or thick skin, but maybe it was just plain sloppiness in an assembly-line massacre.

Both Falla's witness and Mateo attribute the survival of these five people to the grace of God. The literary beauty and possible doubt raised by the river parting in Mateo's account is almost insignificant in the face of a horror so great that mere survival becomes a miraculous feat. To not die in the unbridled terror of a village massacre in Guatemala was so incomprehensible to both Mateo and Falla's witness that both had to use divine intervention as an explanation for the extraordinary phenomenon of surviving genocide.

In his work on the trauma and history of the Holocaust, LaCapra points out how testimonies “provide something other than purely documentary



knowledge. Testimonies are significant in the attempt to understand experience and its aftermath, including the role of memory and its lapses, in coming to terms with—or denying or repressing—the past” (2001:86–87). As an example LaCapra cites the work of Dori Laub for the Yale Fortunoff collection of Holocaust survivor videos. LaCapra recounts Laub’s story of a woman narrating her survival and her memories of witnessing the Auschwitz uprising: “All of a sudden, we saw four chimneys going up in flames, exploding. The flames shot in the sky, people were running. It was unbelievable” (LaCapra 2001:87). Laub recounts how this woman’s testimony was screened “to better understand the era” several months later at a conference on education and the Holocaust. A heated discussion ensued because historians disputed the testimony, claiming that it was inaccurate because one chimney had blown up at Auschwitz, not four. This “error” in her testimony led many to conclude that all events recounted in her testimony were therefore inaccurate (LaCapra 2001:88).

Laub is a psychoanalyst and actually participated in the interview of this woman. He came to a different conclusion about the veracity of the testimony: “The woman was testifying,” he says, “not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up at Auschwitz was as incredible as four. The number mattered less than the fact of the occurrence. The event itself was almost inconceivable. The woman testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth” (LaCapra 2001:88).

Laub’s story, as LaCapra suggests, “prompts one to raise the questions of traumatic memory and its relation to memory both in the ordinary sense of the word and in its more critical sense insofar as it is tested and, within limits, controlled by historical research” (2001:89). When presenting ethnographic material and sharing the testimonies of massacre survivors in academic and policy venues, I have often been asked, “How do you know they are telling you the truth? How do you decide what is true?” While one might believe that these questions themselves reflect the disbelief of the person asking the question, I have come to believe that these questions more reflect a desire for an orderly and tangible world—a world that, if it ever existed, is turned upside down and made surreal by the obscenity of

war and genocide. In her work on trauma and recovery, Judith Herman has observed: “Traumatic events destroy the victim’s fundamental assumptions about the safety of the world, the positive value of self, and the meaningful order of creation” (1992:51). Thus memories of survival seem both obscene and surreal to those who have not experienced it or have not come close to it through its recounting by survivors. Conversely, those who have experienced and survived extreme state violence, regardless of place and time, often comment that the testimonies resonate with their own experiences of survival. Indeed, Indonesians, South Africans, Rwandans, Salvadorans, Argentines, and Chileans, among others, have often shared their own stories in public venues to contest those who have asked about the truth of the testimonies I have presented.

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

Indeed, it is from the seemingly never-ending testimonies of survivors that researchers seek to reconstruct genocide. The deluge of painful memories is shared by survivors who seek to reconstruct their personal and community histories and, at the same time, to communicate the experience and memory of these events to outsiders. It is from this deluge that can envelop the researcher, as well as those giving testimonies, that we seek to disentangle “facts” and, at the same time, to understand and respect the raw memories shared with us.

#### THE “GREY ZONE” OF RESEARCH

Further complicating testimony-based research with genocide survivors is the significant probability that one will take testimonies from “compromised” survivors or even out-and-out collaborators. Levi problematized this space as the “grey zone” constituted by “the hybrid class of prisoner-

functionary” in which “the two camps of masters and servants diverge and converge” (1989:42). In the Guatemalan genocide Maya youth were forcibly recruited into the Guatemalan army and boys and men forced into army-controlled civil patrols. Sometimes the extreme marginalization and poverty experienced by Maya youth was enough to convince them to allow themselves to be recruited. Gaspar, a Tz’utijil-Maya who grew up in conditions of enslavement on a finca and in the streets of Guatemala City, recalls:

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 Kaibil because I was tall, fast, and smart.<sup>5</sup> 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. There was no water. Well, we had no water and we were given no water. But our trainer had water. He walked ahead of us on the path spilling water to remind us of our thirst. I was innocent. When we were ordered to pick up the stray dogs on the street, I thought we were going to learn how to train them, that we 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 were ordered to butcher the chickens and dogs and put their meat and blood in a big bowl. Then, we had to eat and drink this dog and chicken meat that was in a bath of blood. Whoever vomited had to vomit into the shared bowl and get back in line to eat and drink more. We had to eat it all, including the vomit, until no one vomited.

The army kills part of your identity. They want to break you and make you a new man. A savage man. They inspired me to kill. There was a ladino recruit who said that Indians were worthless and that we didn't go to school because we didn't want to. I pushed him off a cliff. I would have enjoyed it if he had died. This is how the army creates monsters.

You become very hard in the mountains and sometimes the only thing you feel is fear. You are afraid of any man, or every man. After my first battle with the guerrilla, I decided to escape, because I wanted to improve myself and found no way to do it in the army. (Sanford 2003:183-184)

Gaspar's story is, as Levi suggested of testimonies from the grey zone, "not self-contained. It is pregnant, full of significance, asks more questions than it answers, sums up in itself the entire theme of the grey zone and leaves one dangling. It shouts and clamors to be understood, because in it one perceives a symbol, as in dreams and the signs from heaven" (1989:66). In our meetings Gaspar expressed a deep commitment to the truth about what had happened. Each time he came to my house, he would begin by saying, "I am going to tell you everything. I am going to tell the truth. It is inhuman, but I will tell you what they made us do." In his sharing of these memories, his stories were always powerful and descriptive. I could

see the place where the violence happened. I could hear the pleas of those who were injured or killed. I could feel his disgust and hatred, and also the power he felt at the moments he carried out these atrocities. Sometimes he would shake as he told me of these experiences. Sometimes I would shake after he left my home.

I believe that testimonies like Gaspar's, which emanate from the grey zone, at one and the same time push and redefine the limits of anthropological research on genocide and violence. They blur the neat categories of performer (perpetrator), victim, and witness as suggested by David Riche's triangular model of violence (1986). Further, they challenge the limits of research in postgenocidal contexts and force us to come to terms with representations of truth and memory as much as they do with contradictory representations of genocide after the fact. They demand that we heed LaCapra's insistence on the need for "empathetic unsettlement" when taking testimonies and for an inclusion of that unsettlement in our analyses (2001:xi). They also reaffirm the importance of such subjective qualities of research as "careful inquiry, specific knowledge, [and] critical judgment" (LaCapra 2001:xiii). And, rather than discount Gaspar's testimony for being outside the "authentic" victim-survivor experience or for being too tangential to the actual genocide, Philippe Bourgois suggests that it is "precisely the very peripheral qualities" of the survivor's testimony "that can teach us why genocides continue to be part of the human condition" (2005:90).

#### EXCAVATION AND RECONSTRUCTION

In her ethnographic work on Burma, the Australian anthropologist Monique Skidmore meticulously details the urgency to document lived experiences of ongoing state violence to prevent the academic dismissal of citizen subjectivity—a dismissal that ultimately supports the military regime's historical denial. Specifically, she sees ethnography as playing an important role in highlighting the various subjectivities recreated under authoritarianism to identify the potential forms of political agency (Skidmore 2006). Subjectivities are created by the human condition and constituted and reconstituted in daily life. Different types of situations can create, destroy, or diminish the human capacity to exercise subjectivities. Anthropology offers an opportunity to recognize the unique subjectivities

of genocide survivors. Levi wrote: “We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last—the power to refuse our consent” (1993:41). In this context Levi points to the diminished capacity of survivors to exercise their citizen subjectivity. Yet even in the extreme conditions of the Holocaust, Levi identifies refusal of consent as the “one power” left to survivors. This power to refuse consent is remembered by survivors and can become pivotal not only for a collective memory of the past but also for collective action seeking redress. This collective action itself is the constitution of a new political subjectivity.

Listen to Pablo’s testimony of the army occupying his newly repopulated village of Plan de Sánchez in 1984. Two years earlier the army had massacred 188 people, mostly women, children, and elderly. In 1984 the army was concentrating massacre survivors into army-controlled model villages that included the forced participation of all men as patrollers in army-controlled civil patrols and indoctrination projects to negate the very genocide committed by the army.<sup>6</sup> Pablo remembers the first such meeting he was required to attend:

The army official said, “Welcome to all of you. I have called you here to ask you some questions. Do you deserve to have what happened in Plan de Sánchez happen again? Who of you here behaves like shit? Who of you here doesn’t want to collaborate?” That’s how he began. Then, he took off his jacket. He took off his machine gun. He took off his belt and threw it down in front of the people. “Who is opposed?” he shouted and picked up his machine gun and pointed it at all the patrollers. “Who is here who doesn’t want to collaborate?” he said. “Whoever doesn’t want to collaborate, I will finish him off right here with this,” he said with his machine gun pointing out at the people. “Look here, what happened in Plan de Sánchez, please, no one is going to complain about it because whoever complains,” he said holding up his machine gun, “this is what you get.” By then he was really red in the face. He said, “Forget about everything that has happened. Your mothers, your fathers are dead. Leave it at that. Forget it.”

“Watch out!” he said, “If you start complaining. . . .” Then, he was right in front of me. He looked at me and said, “Do you hear me?” “Yes,” I said. And then I guess because I was already conquered by death and I

felt no fear, I thought, "If they kill me, they kill me. But they are going to kill me for the truth." I looked up at him and said, "Excuse me sir, pardon my question. In my case, I was in the army in Jutiapa and the army killed my father. So, why do you say now that we have peace and should forget everything that has happened? Why has all this happened? Why did the army kill my father?"

The official shouted at me, "Shut your mouth!" But I said, "You can forget, but we are the ones in pain. We will never forget. What happened is written in our hearts. What would you do if they killed your whole family? Would you be capable of forgetting it? Look sir, the truth is that I am not afraid to declare and speak the truth. I was in the army. I was told that I was there to defend the patria, the land, and the family, and the army killed my family. And this sir, I will never forget. Maybe you can forget it, but we can't."

He shouted at the patrollers, "And is this true? Is that what happened in Plan de Sánchez?" All the patrollers were looking at the ground. He was expecting everyone to say, "No," that everyone would agree with him. Someone in the group softly said, "Yes, it is true." And others started to nod in agreement and say, "Yes, it is true. It is true." The official was still holding his machine gun, but he grabbed his jacket and belt and the rest of his things. He didn't say anything to us. He said to another officer, "Bring in the specialist to explain to this kid." Then, he left. (Sanford 2003:226–227)

"This kid" was Pablo. He was 16 and had already lost every member of his family except for his younger brother, who was the lone survivor of the massacre. Pablo's refusal to consent to forgetting the army massacre of his family and village led to a collective community refusal to consent to the army's indoctrination. It also marked the beginning of the reassertion of the community's collective memory of the massacre—one that would eventually lead the community to be among the first to have an exhumation in Guatemala. Pablo recalls: "After the meeting, lots of people congratulated me. They thanked me. They said, 'You are really aggressive. You declared the truth. We will never forget your courage'" (Sanford 2003:227). Indeed, as LaCapra suggests, establishing accurate shared memory of such past "limit events" plays a significant role in the development of a genuine political process for the collectivity (2001:96).

Still, Pablo's challenge to the army official in 1984 and the community's collective organizing for an exhumation of the clandestine cemetery of massacre victims in 1994 were not without incident. Pablo explains:

The specialist was one of these people from civilian affairs who just said the same things that official had said, but in a softer voice. "We have to forget everything. What you said is true, but we can't bring back the dead. There is nothing to be done. We are with you now and you are with us," he said. . . . The patrols came through a few days later. They just kept walking around. They were always coming back and walking through here.

They did that when you were here during the exhumation. They came at night. They wanted to know what was in the house where the forenses kept their tools. I told them we had loaned the house to people to store their belongings. That was the army's revenge against us—to send a platoon here. One of the soldiers came over to ask me questions. They asked me for a place to spend the night. I told them that we never refuse shelter to anyone and told them they could sleep in the corridor outside. "What about that house?" he asked. I told him there was no space there. . . . When the sun rose, they got up and stayed about two hours. They said they wanted to buy some food. But we didn't have enough food to sell. So I gave them each a tortilla. They left. But instead of taking the main road, they went to the path that leads to Juan Manuel's house. They were going there to investigate him. They were separating so they could surround his house. So, I went after them. I said, "Excuse me, I think you have lost your way. The path out of the village is up here. This path doesn't go anywhere." Then, they left. (Sanford 2003:227)

#### TRUTH AND POLITICAL SPACE

The army officer's attempt to institutionalize forgetting formed part of an official campaign to write the genocide victims out of Guatemalan history. As Levi wrote, "In an authoritarian state it is considered permissible to alter the truth; to rewrite history retrospectively, to distort the news, suppress the true, add the false. Propaganda is substituted for information" (1995:212). Fortunately, the Guatemalan army failed in its attempt to rewrite history in Plan de Sánchez the day Pablo challenged the officer



and throughout Guatemala after the Archbishop's Office on Human Rights (Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, ODHA) published its 4-volume *Nunca más* report (1998) and the Commission for Historical Clarification (the Guatemalan truth commission, Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, CEH) published its 12-volume *Memoria del silencio* report (1999). Each report condemned the Guatemalan state for carrying out a premeditated campaign of violence against its own citizens. Significantly, the CEH concluded that the army had carried out genocidal acts, massacred 626 indigenous villages, displaced 1.5 million people, forced more than 150,000 people into refuge in Mexico, and left more than 200,000 people dead or disappeared (CEH 1999). These reports were possible because survivors like Pablo gave testimony to investigators. Indeed, Pablo participated in the third exhumation of a clandestine cemetery of massacre victims in Guatemala. This exhumation carried out by the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala, FAFG) took place before the peace accords were signed between the army and the guerrillas, before the army-controlled civil patrols were demobilized, before the United Nations established its presence in Guatemala with MINUGUA (Misión Naciones Unidas en Guatemala, UN Mission in Guatemala), and before international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) came onto the Guatemalan scene.<sup>7</sup>

During the exhumation, the FAFG, the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman and the survivors received threats: "Leave the Dead in Peace, Sons of Whores, or the Violence of the Past will Return." The survivors were undeterred. They knew the exhumation had to continue or they would lose what little political space they had. They were concerned for our safety because the local army commander had publicly stated that all the "anthropologists, internationals, and journalists in Plan de Sánchez are guerrillas." Nonetheless, Erazmo, who had lost his wife, eight children, and 80-year-old mother in the massacre, pointed to the open graves and said, "There, there is no lie. There you are seeing the truth." I asked what importance the truth could have 12 years after the massacre. Juan Manuel, who had also lost his wife and family, said, "We want peace. We want people to know what happened here so that it does not happen again—not here, not in some other village, department or country" (Sanford 2003:46–48).

My experience taking the testimonies of Pablo, Erazmo, Juan Manuel, and hundreds of others resonates with Levi's thoughts on memory. He wrote: "For these survivors, remembering is a duty. They do not want to forget, and above all they do not want the world to forget, because they understand that their experiences were not meaningless, that the camps were not accidental, an unforeseen historical happening" (1995:221). For Levi, as for O'Brien, remembering is part of grappling with the experience of surviving what others seem only able to doubt.

At the same time, those conducting research on genocide in postconflict situations, and sometimes during the conflict, must consider the security of those giving testimony because the narrators are real people who live and act in real social history of which the testimony is a part (Beverley 1996b:37). Although the majority of survivors with whom I have spoken have sooner or later chosen anonymity, not once has a single survivor asked me not to use their testimony. Indeed, when asking for anonymity, survivors emphasize that it is the story that has an urgent need to be known. As Doña Juanita explained after changing her mind about the use of her name, "I am afraid of what might happen to my children if I use my name. But if you need my name to give faith to my testimony, I give you my permission" (Testimony no. 7, September 7, 1997, Panzós, Guatemala). While survivors come forward and speak for many different reasons, common among them are the desire to unburden their pain, to share the content of their lived experience of violence, and to have their experiences validated by those who listen and by the wider audience they hope their testimony will reach. This is, after all, the essence of testimony—it is "an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation" (Yúdice 1996:44).

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

While forgetting may not exist, remembering and the sharing of memories may not always be the same. In his work on oral history, Alessandro Portelli (1991) observes that the timing of the researcher in the life of the research subject can produce different outcomes, analyses, and reflections on the part of the research subject. Likewise, the “real world” political timing, as well as the timing in the life of the researcher, can also make significant and different contributions to political memory and to an understanding of the development of new subjectivities. For example, 20 years after having survived a Salvadoran army attack on civilians during his field research among revolutionary peasants during the 1980s, Bourgois revisited his field notes and wrote a poignant, self-reflective essay about the sanitizing effect the Cold War had had on his analysis at that time (2001). If both narrator and listener interpretations of events may shift over time, what is the validity of testimony? And, what is the contribution of an anthropology of genocide largely based on survivor testimonies?

Testimonies portray the experience of the narrators as agents of collective memory and identity, rather than as their representatives (Yúdice 1996). The accretion of marginalized voices transforms experience into collective memory. Anthropological representations of lived experience subvert official memory, institutional time, and homogenized culture. For the Guatemalan historian Sergio Tischler Visquerra (2005), this subversion of official time and official history opens the door to a multiplicity of time and experience that, in turn, allows for the inclusion of diverse subjectivities with new visions of the past, present, and future. In this way, changing political, economic, and cultural subject positions are central to both understanding past genocides and preventing new ones in the future. Anthropological research over time offers the possibility of developing theoretical explanations without losing the meaning of the experience of violence for social subjects. And, as Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman suggest, this anthropological work is critical because “the production of the subject in conditions of violence is largely invisible to public commissions and judicial inquiries about violence” (2000:13). Anthropological research on genocide can serve to mediate between politics and the economy, between the Cold War and globalization, and between neoliberal triumph and utopian dreams of revolution.

I first began working in Plan de Sánchez during the FAFG exhumation of the clandestine cemetery in 1994. I have continued to visit the village and meet with Juan Manuel, Erazmo, Pablo, and other survivors. On a visit to Plan de Sánchez in 1997, Juan Manuel recalled the October 1994 reburial of the massacre victims. The reburial began with a mass in the church in Rabinal and was followed by a public gathering in the plaza in front of the church. Thousands of Achi-Maya filled the plaza and streets of Rabinal to witness the burial procession. After the mass the crowd in the plaza listened to the words of the survivors from Plan de Sánchez, which were amplified throughout the community. Juan Manuel remembered the moment:

After the exhumation, people had been congratulating me. They would say, "Congratulations Juan. You really have balls to declare the truth." But then they would tell me to be careful because everyone knew who I was and there were people who didn't like what I did. I was thinking about this as we carried the coffins to the church. After mass, when I was standing in front of everyone, I just wasn't afraid. I told the whole truth. I said the army should be ashamed. "How shameful for them to say that my wife with a baby on her back was a guerrilla. They dragged her out of my house and killed her. Shameful! They opened the abdomens of pregnant women. And then they said that they killed guerrillas. Shameful!" I said. I talked about the people in Rabinal who had collaborated with the army and how they walked through the streets with no shame for the killings they had done. In this moment, I had no fear. I declared the truth.

Afterwards a *licenciado* told me, "What a shame that you are a poor peasant and not a professional. If you were a professional, there would really be change here."<sup>8</sup> I thought to myself, "I may be a sad peasant who can only half-speak, but I wasn't afraid and I spoke the truth." The entire pueblo was there. The park was completely full. Everyone was listening to what I was saying and I didn't feel embarrassed. I knew that afterwards maybe they would be waiting for me in the street somewhere and that that might be my luck. I said, "Believe me, the guilty think that with just one finger they can cover the sun. But with what they have done here, they simply can't." (Sanford 2003:230)

In my own experience, one of the most significant aspects of writing ethnographies of the Guatemalan genocide is the sharing of so many his-

tories previously untold. Indeed, as Portelli notes, “Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (1991:50). As these experiences are made public (even when the identity of the speaker is protected in anonymity), each new story creates space for another survivor to tell his or her story. While testimonies represented an accretion of corroborating supposed facts for FAFG, ODHA, and CEH investigations, they also represented an expansion of individual agency in the giving of testimony that collectively created new public space for local community action. It is from the collectivity of the many fragments of community truth telling that new space was created during the exhumation and gave rise to survivors beginning to initiate conversations about the massacre in public at the exhumation and at reburial sites.

#### CONCLUSION

One of the effects of the massive violence of limit events is the indiscriminate taking of victims, and the namelessness this creates for victims and survivors as well as for the violence itself. Trying to locate those surviving the violence in Panzós, Doña Natalia explained, “You can count the families that weren’t affected by the violence here. I don’t know who they are, but there must be some. There were always dead” (Testimony No. 19, September 7, 1997, Panzós, Guatemala). Even in small communities, the numbers of victims and survivors are so numerous as to erase individual identity through the sheer quantity of stories because each story embodies another from which another unfolds. This erasure is, of course, compounded by the official silencing of victims and survivors through government disinformation and the negation of the violence—silencing that has been enforced by army acts and threats of continued violence. While meticulous note taking during testimonies can attach a name, an age, a sex, family information, a life history, physical characteristics, and personal demeanor to each individual, this descriptive approach belies the reality of the anthropologist, translator, and individual giving testimony, who are collectively seeking a vantage point from which to comprehend the continuum of extreme violence experienced, because the agency of survival is found in the fragmented memories invoked in the process. Portelli reminds us that “subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible ‘facts.’ What informants believe is indeed a historical fact (that is, the

fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened” (1991:50–51). In other words, agency and history are both found in the present act of remembering and giving testimony to past and present acts of survival.

For the anthropologist listening to some 20 emotionally wrenching testimonies each day, the absorption of the stories leaves one with blurred faces of survivors and powerful images of the events survived (including composite images of events that are also produced by the accretion of testimonies). Rather than names and other facts, the cold, the hunger, the fear, and the desperation of survival are the sensations invoked in encounters with survivors following the taking of testimony. Indeed, Levi reminds us that for survivors, “just as our hunger is not the feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say ‘hunger,’ we say ‘tiredness,’ ‘fear,’ ‘pain,’ we say ‘winter,’ and they are different things” (1993:123). These sensations from the testimonies left an imprint in my memory.

When I would see the men and women who had previously given their testimony, I would sometimes remember their names. Always I would remember what they had survived, the cadence of their voice and their body language as they told me their stories, the circumstances of their personal loss and survival, the rivers in which they had submerged themselves as they fled the army, the kidnapping of a son, or that of a husband. I would always remember their pain, their hunger, their thirst. I remembered, and continue to remember, the individuals who trusted me with their testimony by what they suffered. Perhaps survivors taught this to me as they gave their testimonies—how they remember their experiences of violence as living memories, not as names and dates frozen in the past. Or perhaps they taught me to “forget” information that could potentially harm others; information such as knowing individuals by name. Indeed, with few exceptions, I was always instructed by my friends to never acknowledge our friendship or even acquaintance to *desconocidos* (strangers).

Still, as I finish this essay, carefully cross-checking names, dates, and places to testimonies, I am reminded of Carl Jung’s words: “The finest and most significant conversations of my life were anonymous” (1989:134). None of the individuals who gave testimony are anonymous people. And despite their anonymity on the page, their silence and the namelessness of the violence is at least partially broken. It is not the identities of the sur-

vivors that need to be known to “give faith to their testimonies,” as Doña Juanita queried. Faith is given to their testimonies by their words breaking the silence and asserting their right to speak out against the genocide they survived. In speaking out, they assert their agency and their right to be heard. In this process the identities of state institutions and individuals responsible for *La Violencia* are also revealed. Significantly, in breaking the silence and the namelessness of victims and survivors through testimony, their actions and lives are recognized—not as object victims of state violence, but as conscious subjects negotiating extreme and personal violence in their lives (Sanford 1997). This recognition of past and present lived experience, political consciousness, and action is, in fact, evidence that “political agency becomes the factored product of multiple subject positions” (Feldman 1991:4).

At an academic presentation about the Panzós massacre, an anthropologist in the audience challenged the authenticity of the community leader Maria Maquín’s discourse because she had used the words *nunca más* (never again). The anthropologist said, “Those just aren’t her words. That is the discourse of outsiders. That is human rights discourse.” Another anthropologist added, “Someone else is talking through her.” In other words, these anthropologists did not recognize Maquín as a conscious political subject capable of appropriating global human rights discourse for local use. Nor did they recognize the powerful identification massacre survivors can experience with discourses on human rights that resonate with their own experiences of survival.<sup>9</sup> Certainly, they had not considered the “counterpossibility of transculturation from below,” which, as John Beverley suggests, should lead us to understand and appreciate how the subaltern appropriates us for his or her own purposes (1996a:272).

In *Book of the Embraces*, Eduardo Galeano notes that the root of *recordar*, to remember, is the Latin *re-cordis*, which means “to pass back through the heart.” The public remembering of Juan Manuel, Pablo, and Maria, this passing back through the heart before their communities, is the very essence of the discourse and practice of human agency, political consciousness, self-representation, and action. Their stories are not the stories of dead people, though the dead are present. These testimonies from survivors of the Guatemalan genocide are stories of the living—of those who survived and have much to share when given the opportunity to speak. Pablo and Juan Manuel broke the silencing of massacre survivors with

their public testimonies. At the collective level of the community, this expansion of individual agency through testimony created new public space for community discussions and action. Thus Juan Manuel was able to stand before his community condemning the massacre of his family and, despite the great risk he took, remember that he “just was not afraid.” The accretion of agency and facts in the public space of the exhumations opened the political space seized by Juan Manuel, in which he fused discourse and practice when he declared the army guilty of massacres in his community. In this sense, his public speech represents the multitude of the previously silenced and nameless who can now stand before their communities and directly and publicly contest those who cast doubt on their credibility and disparage their lived experiences of survival. Borrowing from Hans Kellner: “Never again is now” (1998:235).

#### EPILOGUE

Clyde Snow always says, “The bones don’t lie.” Indeed they do not. The testimonies of survivors and the forensic analysis of the remains of massacre victims in Plan de Sánchez provided evidence for a petition filed by survivors with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 1995 requesting that the commission pass the case on to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Over the years we have often discussed this case with survivors in Plan de Sánchez. 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. Cases can take up to ten years. “Sooner or later there will be justice” became the refrain for survivors.

On April 29, 2004, the Inter-American Court issued its condemnation of 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 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. The court later announced the damages the Guatemalan state will be required to pay to the relatives of victims at \$7.9 million ([www.corteidh.or.cr/seriecpdf/seriec\\_116\\_esp.pdf](http://www.corteidh.or.cr/seriecpdf/seriec_116_esp.pdf), accessed Oct. 14, 2006).



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 implemented its National Security Doctrine in their counterinsurgency actions; and (3) these counterinsurgency actions carried out within the Guatemalan government's National Security Doctrine took place during the regime of General Efraín Ríos Montt who came to power through a military coup in March 1982.

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 consecrated in the Human Rights Convention of the Organization of American States: (1) the right to personal integrity; (2) the right to judicial protection; (3) the right to judicial guarantees of equality before the law; (4) the right to freedom of conscience; (5) the right to freedom of religion; and (6) the right to private property ([www.corteidh.or.cr/seriecpdf/seriec\\_105\\_esp.pdf](http://www.corteidh.or.cr/seriecpdf/seriec_105_esp.pdf), accessed Oct. 14, 2006).

The Plan de Sánchez case was considered by the Inter-American Court at the request of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which had received a petition from Juan Manuel, Pablo, Erazmo, and other relatives of the massacre victims. These survivors requested consideration in the court because of the lack of justice in the Guatemalan legal system. Since the Plan de Sánchez case was initiated in 1995, the FAFG has carried out more than 200 exhumations of clandestine cemeteries of massacre victims in Guatemala. Each of these exhumations has included the filing of a criminal case with forensic evidence against the Guatemalan army and its agents. To date, only the Río Negro case has been heard in a Guatemalan court, and no army officials were indicted in the case that found three civil patrollers guilty (see Sanford 2003). In July 2006 the Spanish court Juzgado Central de Instrucción No 1, Audiencia Nacional, Ministerio de Justicia, Madrid, issued international arrest warrants for seven former military officials, including Ríos Montt, for genocide, terrorism, torture, assassination, and illegal detention (Pérez and Orantes 2006). In 2008 Ríos Montt continues to stay his extradition to Spain through appeals in local Guatemalan courts.

## NOTES

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1. I began collecting testimonies from Guatemalan refugees in the United States in 1990. I began working with the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG) in Guatemala in June 1994. I conducted field research during the summers of 1994 and 1995, the spring of 1996, from the fall of 1996 to the fall of 1997, and concluded in the summer of 1998, with annual follow-up visits to various communities each year since 2002. For Sanford 2003 I collected more than 400 interviews and testimonies with survivors of massacres in villages in Chimaltenango, San Martín Jilotepeque, San Andrés Sacabajá, Chinique, Santa Cruz del Quiché, Chichicastenango, Cunen, Rabinal, Nebaj, Chajul, Cotzal, Panzós, Salamá, Cobán, San Miguel Acatán, and San Miguel Chicaj. I carried out field research in communities before, during, and after the exhumation of clandestine cemeteries. I also led the testimonial and archival research and wrote the historical reconstructions for the FAFG's report to the Commission for Historical Clarification for massacres in Panzós and Acul (FAFG 2000).
2. The term *testimony* is used here to mean the narration of one's memories of a significant and traumatic event or events.
3. *Stories* is used here to refer to the plot and characters of the different, real-life events chronicled in a testimony.
4. *Witness*, as used in this context, refers to someone who saw (witnessed) an event, as opposed to the act of witnessing through the taking of testimony.
5. Kaibiles are the elite fighting forces of the Guatemalan army.
6. The term *genocide* is used here in the legal sense of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Indeed, the Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification concluded that "genocidal acts" had taken place (CEH 1999). On April 29, 2004, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights condemned the Guatemalan state for genocide in the Plan de Sánchez case. See Corte IDH, Caso Masacre Plan de Sánchez v. Guatemala, Serie C No. 105, Sentencia de 29 de abril, 2004, and Dissenting Opinion of Judge Cancado Trindade. Furthermore, on July 7, 2006, the Spanish court Juzgado Central de Instrucción No 1, Audiencia Nacional, Ministerio de Justicia, Madrid, issued international arrest warrants for seven former military officials for the crime of genocide, as well as for terrorism, torture, assassination, and illegal detention.
7. For more on the first exhumations in Guatemala, see FAFG 1997.
8. A *licenciado* is someone with a university bachelor's degree.

9. For more on Maria Maquín and the Panzós massacre, see Sanford 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2008. See also FAFG 2000.

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