

Excavations of the Heart

Reflections on Truth, Memory, and Structures of Understanding

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It is possible to develop an intimacy
with the most disturbing of things.

—Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills*

A Village in My Mind

The house is the first image. It stands alone. Light brown tufts of grass tightly thatched over bamboo walls. There is a simple awning at the entrance, which has no door. A promise of emptiness within. This is the close-up of the hut. My image. My memory of his memory. It is in a village. Surrounded by green rice paddies and an enormous clear blue sky.¹

The house is always empty, eerily untouched. There is pandemonium in the village. Women screaming and running with their children. Explosions and billowing smoke that fills the sky. The women and children are small. Smaller still as they run past the burning huts. The men in green camouflage are giants. Soldiers outnumber villagers. They wear sunglasses and helmets. The fleeing women wear delicate *mu las* (Vietnamese leaf hats) that hang by a string from the front of their necks and bounce off the backs of their simple peasant clothing as they try to flee. The men are U.S. soldiers. They shout louder than the women cry. I know their voices will triumph. Few villagers will escape. All the villages burn. This is any village, anytime, anywhere. This is a village in Vietnam. This is the image he gave to me.

He was a twenty-six-year-old war veteran. In 1972, after three years as a foot soldier in Vietnam, the only person my brother-in-law trusted with his confessions was a twelve-year-old girl. Each night, he drank to numb the pain of booby-trapped children, burned villages, and mass graves. In his stupor, he would describe each army action and always with great detail. The child accepting the

gift. The explosion. Setting fire to the thatched roof. Sometimes he laughed and seemed to delight in my horror. Those days I hated him. But just as often as he laughed, there were nights when he cried, gasping for air and choking on his words. He told me he did not want to kill anyone; that he had to tell someone the truth, that I was the only one who would listen and understand. On those nights, I felt as much sorrow for him as I felt for the people in that village. It was a crescendo of powerlessness. Mine, because I could not make his pain go away. His, because he could not forget his crimes. The villagers, because they could not escape.

I was his confidant. Through his drunken tirades, I learned of the vulnerability and fear of the victimizer. Of the bitterness of shame. The powerlessness of guilt. These encounters were a foreign invasion that ruptured the security of my world. An emotional violence to the dailiness of my childhood. Each night, he would turn on the television, tune in to *Star Trek*, and start to drink. As the Starship Enterprise ventured out into unknown galaxies, my brother-in-law described how U.S. soldiers tricked Vietnamese children into carrying booby-trapped packages back to their village; how the exploding package ripped up the children, scattering their body parts. He told me that girls my age prostituted themselves for food, but that often these girl prostitutes were traps for U.S. soldiers. In my mind, Vietnam was a place where unarmed, hungry children frightened big American men who wore grenades around their waists and carried machine guns.

I was never afraid of him. I never avoided these conversations. I never told anyone about them. Despite my horror at his crimes, I was drawn to his conflicting representations of truth and meaning, and the emotional power of my own visceral responses. I hated him when he laughed. I pitied him when he cried. In the crescendo of powerlessness, I felt the privilege of being his confessor. His stories introduced what Primo Levi called the “grey zone” into the neat black-and-white world of “the domino theory and stopping communism” (a.k.a. “why we were in Vietnam”) which I was given at school and by the television news over dinner each night. I felt the power of accompanying him as he wrested from oblivion his contradictory truths: the fears, secrets, and vulnerabilities of U.S. soldiers in Vietnam.

Yet within a few years, my memories of his memories faded with his departure from my life through alcoholism and divorce. I used to believe that he got drunk to forget Vietnam. Now, I believe he drank to remember. Only the anesthesia of alcohol allowed him the safe space necessary for memory. Only through the numbing of self-medication was he able to find the strength to confront oblivion—his own, his family’s, his country’s. Three decades later, I still carry with me the image of that village and struggle to understand truth, memory, and oblivion.

As an anthropologist conducting research on human rights, truth, and memory in Guatemala, my research has focused on the exhumation of clandestine cemeteries in isolated Maya villages (Sanford 2003a and 2003b). To participate in the exhumation of a clandestine cemetery is to walk on the edge that divides

memory from oblivion. Massacre survivors, forensic anthropologists, and international human rights advocates, each in our own way, fight the oblivion of Guatemala's social memory through excavations of the heart by giving and witnessing testimonies of survival, and through exhumations of mass graves of massacre victims that provide forensic evidence and scientific corroboration to survivor testimonies.

In this chapter I explore truth and memory through ongoing narratives of the Vietnam war, La Violencia in Guatemala, and contemporary efforts to come to terms with each. I suggest that individual, communal, and national memories of "bare life" (Benjamin 1978; Agamben 1998) in ambient violence offer trajectories of meaning for survivors, perpetrators, bystanders, and others who later come on the scene to witness the reconstruction of everyday life amid the remains of a violent past.² Further, I suggest that one's location on a given trajectory of meaning determines one's structure of understanding—which ultimately shapes the contours of "understandable" truth. This is not a relativistic argument that all truths are equal. Rather, I am suggesting that structures of understanding serve as a kind of filter; one that does not always, or easily, allow for the absorption or processing of truth—particularly difficult, painful, grotesque truths that can so rupture the structures of understanding that an individual, communal, or national trajectory of meaning in the world is forever shifted.³ Finally, I want to propose that neither structures of understanding nor trajectories of meaning are stagnant rather they are in constant flux and often mutually redefining motion, which challenges the rules of engagement for (and has serious implications for the responsibilities of) researchers and advocates alike. With these thoughts in mind, I close this chapter with some reflections on the challenges the current war in Colombia presents to engaged research and public anthropology.

Exhuming Truth in Rural Guatemala

Evidence produced by exhumations is legally recognized. It is concrete. It is real. You can touch it. It is the bones of the victims we pull out of the earth. In the case of Plan de Sánchez, like most massacres, the army claimed there had been a battle with the EGP (Guerrilla Army of the Poor-Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres). The 1994 exhumations clearly showed that the vast majority of the 168 victims of the 1982 massacre were women, children, and the elderly. Moreover, the forensic evidence unquestionably proved that skeletons in the grave were victims of a massacre, not an armed confrontation.

Yet, even as bones are pulled from the earth and analyzed scientifically, the quantification of truth remains ethereal. Every day that I have spent in exhumations in villages throughout rural Guatemala, campesinos from other villages (elderly women, elderly men, young women and men, children, entire families) have come to witness the excavation of the graves.⁴ Inevitably, they would tell

me that they needed an exhumation in their village because they too had suffered a massacre. I would always ask them how many people had died, and the response was always the same: "Casi todos" (nearly everyone). Sometimes they meant all of the men in their family. Sometimes they meant all of the women. Sometimes they meant nearly everyone in their village had been killed.

"A True War Story Is Never Moral"

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" (1990:77). It was the obscenity of truth that challenged our society to come to terms (however haltingly and incompletely) with U.S. intervention in Vietnam. The national trajectory of meaning of the Vietnam war helped to reshape national structures of understanding of war. At its most simplistic and least objectionable, or in other words as a product of the media for mass consumption, the lessons of Vietnam were simple: first, U.S. involvement in war should not involve the loss of life for young U.S. soldiers; second, successful military intervention would be measured by military objectives and limiting the loss of life of U.S. soldiers. A third, more critical lesson challenges the mass destruction of civilian lives and complete decimation of Vietnamese villages and their inhabitants, which has implications for contemporary proxy wars regardless of the level of involvement of U.S. soldiers. Despite popular emphasis on lessons one and two, the critical lesson seeps in and out of popular memory through films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, and eyewitness nonfiction and fictional accounts such as *Dispatches* (journalistic nonfiction, Herr 1991), *The Things They Carried* (U.S. soldier's "nonfiction" novel), and *The Sorrow of War* (North Vietnamese soldier's novel, Ninh 1993). It is this seepage that has pushed national trajectories of meaning to such a degree that it is possible at one and the same time to believe that it was both wrong and inevitable to kill women, children, elderly, and other unarmed civilians. This seepage also allows for recognition of the My Lai massacre, but the emphasis on lessons one and two inhibits a national recognition of the ordinariness of My Lai and instead leaves it in the national consciousness as an ambiguous and tragic example of "when things go wrong." Thus revelations in April 2001 about former senator and current New School University president Bob Kerrey leading his squadron of Navy Seals into the Vietnamese village of Thanh Phong and killing thirteen to twenty unarmed women, children, and elderly was framed in the *New York Times Magazine*, which broke the story, as "What Happened in Thanh Phong—On the night of Feb. 25, 1969, in a tiny Vietnamese hamlet, something went horribly wrong" (Vistica 2001).

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how Kerrey gave the order, how far away the shooting began, if enemy fire was received before the squadron fired, if Kerrey helped hold down an elderly man as he was stabbed to death, or if the squadron rounded up women, children, and the elderly and then killed them. What happened in Thanh Phong is a true war story because “you can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever” (O’Brien 1990: 83). This recent revelation reminds the U.S. public that Vietnam is a true war story that never ended for Kerrey, the members of his squad, or the American people—and certainly not for the Vietnamese who survived. Largely missing from analyses of contradictory truths and memories of the Thanh Phong massacre are the voices of survivors, and the lone survivor’s voice that is heard is, for the most part, discounted.

Pham Thi Lanh is a sixty-two-year-old woman who survived the Navy Seals’ massacre in Thanh Phong. More than three decades later, she was interviewed by *60 Minutes II* about the incident, and her testimony affirmed claims by Gerhard Klann, one of Kerrey’s former commandos, who has charged Kerrey with ordering the slaughter. In the *60 Minutes II* interview, Lanh said she saw the squad use knives and guns to murder women, children, and an elderly man. When interviewed by *Time*, she gave the same testimony, then added that she had not actually seen the killing and in the words of *Time*, “had *only* [my emphasis] heard the screams [of those being killed] and later seen the bodies” (Johnson 2001). Lanh is quoted as saying, “I heard screams, ‘Help! They’re killing us!’ So, I crept quietly outside, and I saw them there, lying dead with their heads nearly cut off.” *Time* writer Kay Johnson concludes, “What isn’t clear is whether villager Pham Thi Lanh is an honest witness, a propagandist, or just an old woman with hazy memories.” The same article notes that Kerrey admits that “an atrocity took place,” but “swears it was accidental.” Then, goes on to say that Kerrey “and his supporters argue that Lanh’s account shouldn’t be believed because she was a communist revolutionary married to a Viet Cong soldier, and because her stories have been offered to journalists while Vietnamese government officials sat nearby.” Among those killed by Kerrey and his squad were Lanh’s three sisters, a sister-in-law, and four of her nieces and nephews. The day after the massacre, Lanh and several other villagers dug a mass grave where they buried her relatives and the others killed by Kerrey’s squad. “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).

Kerrey’s Memories, Kerrey’s Anguish

Though Kerrey recognizes that he could be subject to court-martial if the Pentagon were to pursue an investigation of the Thanh Phong massacre, he claims that he did not come forward with this case earlier because he “did not want to make his own personal anguish public any more than other Americans want to

is limited to the structure of understanding of the soldier's story, which not only excludes but also negates the survivor's structure of understanding.

In media coverage of his story, beyond Gerhard Klann's condemnation of the massacre in which he participated, the lone voice of opposition in the U.S. comes from Barry Romo, national coordinator of Vietnam Veterans against the War. "Everything is backwards," Romo told *Time*. "People shouldn't be looking at Kerrey as a victim but at the families of the Vietnamese who were killed. If Kerrey killed them by accident, and knew it, then he owed them some reparation. If he did line them up and shoot them, then you don't get away with murder because you wear a uniform" (Vistica 2001: 31). Thus, Romo seeks to create a new trajectory of meaning which allows for incorporation of both the soldier's and the survivor's structure of understanding.

Romo has a point. The U.S. government and media support the punishment of war criminals when they are Serb, Iraqi, or members of Al Qaeda, but Kerrey is portrayed as an anguished victim (which from a humanistic perspective he was, in that all youth who are thrown into war are victims), but Kerrey and the other members of his squad were also victimizers (and war criminals under international humanitarian law). Moreover, the rhetoric of suspicious peasants, women, and children neither began nor ended in Vietnam. This same rhetoric was used by the CIA, which conflated political affiliation with ethnic identity in order to justify the annihilation of complete indigenous peasant communities in Guatemala: "The well-documented belief by the army that the entire Ixil Indian population is pro-EGP has created a situation in which the army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike" (CIA 1982, 3). I have never been to Vietnam and I don't know Bob Kerrey or Pham Thi Lanh. Still, I want to think about how different our national structure of understanding would be if we honored the survivor's testimony instead of discounting it because she is a Vietnamese peasant woman whose husband may have been a Viet Cong soldier. This isn't such a stretch. Indeed, we can use the context of the U.S. soldier's experience, our national trajectory of meaning (which is widely regarded to have traumatized Kerrey and others) to think for a moment about the space in which Pham Thi Lanh and the other unarmed women, children, and elderly were trying to carry on some semblance of daily life or, in the words of Agamben, "bare life" (1998).

Vietnam war correspondent Michael Herr writes that the U.S. soldiers in Vietnam and their military actions were "charged with hatred and grounded in fear of the Vietnamese" (1991: 39). According to the *New York Times Book Review*, Herr's highly acclaimed book *Dispatches* is "the best book to have been written about the Vietnam War." As a correspondent, Herr writes, "I stood as close to them [the U.S. soldiers] as I could without actually being one of them and then I stood as far back as I could without leaving the planet. Disgust doesn't begin to describe what they made me feel, they threw people out of helicopters, tied

people up and put dogs on them" (67). One soldier told him, "We had a gook and we was gonna skin him" (66).⁶ Another said, "We'd rip out the hedges and burn the hootches and blow all the wells and kill every chicken, pig, and cow in the whole fucking village" (29). Marines pointed out one man to Herr and "swore to God they'd seen him bayonet a wounded North Vietnamese soldier and then lick the knife clean" (35). Herr wrote about the "kid who mailed a gook ear home to his girl and could not understand why she had stopped writing him" (148). Another soldier told Herr, "I'm so fuckin' good 'n' that ain' no shit, neither. Got me one hunnert 'n' fifty-se'en [157] gooks kilt. 'N' fifty caribou. Them're all certified" (179). "It comes down to gut instinct," writes Tim O'Brien. "A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (84).

Memory, Oblivion, and Truth(s)

True war stories are not limited to Vietnam, and my stomach believed in Guatemala from the very first day I began to work with the forensic team in Plan de Sánchez, where nausea, dizziness, and sweaty hands accompanied me as I listened to survivor testimonies. During the second week of work, a delegation of some forty Achi-Maya women and one elderly man came to our work site early in the morning on June 28, 1994.⁷ Doña María appeared to be the leader of the group, although her father Don Miguel was treated with great deference by the entire group. They had walked six hours from Xococ, a village in the valley on the other side of the mountain, to report that on June 26 Xococ civil patrollers had damaged several sites of clandestine cemeteries in their village.⁸ Doña María feared the civil patrol had removed skeletal remains in an effort to destroy any evidence that might subsequently be uncovered should an exhumation take place in Xococ in the future. They came to request that the forensic team investigate the sites to determine if the remains of their loved ones had been taken.

That same morning, I accompanied several members of the forensic team, the local justice of the peace, and the Xococ delegation to survey the grave sites. Plants used by the survivors to mark the graves had been cleared. Though the graves had obviously been disturbed and fragments of a human rib were found mixed with topsoil, the team determined that the skeletons had not been removed. The women asked the justice of the peace to put up an official sign like the one at our work site in Plan de Sánchez, which said: "Do Not Touch. Site of Legal Investigation by Order of the Justice of the Peace under Protection of the National Police." The judge explained that the sign could only be issued by the court when an exhumation began. He also commented on the conspicuous absence of the men of Xococ. The women explained they were absent because of the civil patrol. They said that while some men from Xococ wanted the graves exhumed, the military commissioner did not.⁹ Thus, no patrollers accompanied the team on the site visit because those who did not oppose the exhumation feared those who did.

As an anthropologist, I was very interested in meeting with and interviewing these women from Xococ because of their courage in organizing themselves to request an exhumation against the will of the men in their community. When I mentioned my interest in returning to Xococ to interview the widows, Doña María enthusiastically supported the idea. "All you need to do is come to the village plaza, use the megaphone, and say, 'que vengan las viudas' [widows come here]," she said. "And we will all come."

Later that day, when I spoke with the priest in Rabinal, the municipality to which Plan de Sánchez and Xococ belong, Padre Luis did not believe Doña María. He believed the story of the widows of Xococ was an army plot, some kind of trick to sabotage the work of the forensic team. "Don Miguel is with the army," he told me. "Don Miguel cannot be trusted because he is a leader of the civil patrol and he likes it. He opposes the guerrillas." Padre Luis was convinced that the visits to Plan de Sánchez and the delegation's request for a speedy exhumation were a part of an army plot to trick the forensic team into exhuming civilians killed by the guerrillas or guerrilla combatants killed by the army—either of which would support army claims of armed confrontations with the guerrillas rather than army massacres of unarmed civilians.¹⁰ Moreover, the priest reminded me, "the Xococ civil patrol committed the massacre in Rio Negro," a nearby village. The priest had lived with these communities for years. "I know these people," he reassured me.

For the priest's interpretation of events to be correct, the civil patrol of Xococ, as well as the many widows who traveled to Plan de Sánchez and accompanied us in our survey work in Xococ, would all have had to have been in collusion with the army in the orchestration of a huge lie to the forensic team, the local judge, human rights ombudsman, national press, and the residents of Plan de Sánchez and other surrounding villages. Although I was not convinced by the priest's interpretation, it was present in my mind ten days later as I prepared to visit the widows of Xococ.

Although Kathleen Dill (another anthropologist working in Rabinal) and I had originally made plans to travel to Xococ with the justice of the peace and local human rights ombudsman, this trip was canceled because the ombudsman never arrived. Kathleen and I made arrangements to rent a truck and driver to take us to Xococ, wait for us, and bring us back to Rabinal. Although the judge claimed he couldn't go because of his workload, we sensed he was fearful about entering Xococ without the security of the ombudsman's bodyguards. Kathleen and I were relieved to learn that on this particular day there was a livestock fair in Xococ, which meant that there would be a lot of activity in the village and our arrival would seem a little less extraordinary. We were warned by the judge and forensic team that traveling alone to Xococ could be dangerous, and were given a very long list of extremely contradictory safety tips. In the end, we decided to take lots of pictures and pretend we were tourists in the village. The women of Xococ had invited us, and we wanted to honor their invitation.

Although we were not necessarily expecting to be welcomed by everyone in Xococ, we were shocked that people leaving the fair ignored us. Women I had crossed a river with the previous week looked at the ground as they passed us. As we entered Xococ, we immediately knew why. Xococ was occupied by the army. Soldiers were everywhere in camouflage with grenades around their waists and machine guns in hand. We took pictures of children's dances and livestock at the fair. We were most concerned about endangering anyone in Xococ. After we had been in the village about thirty minutes, Doña María motioned to us to follow her out of sight and earshot of the soldiers. She invited us back to her house.

Entering her home through the cornfield out back rather than from the door at the front, we sat in the darkness with all doors and windows closed. She told us the soldiers had been in Xococ since they had presented their petition for a speedy exhumation. The civil patrol had gone to the army base to request troops in hopes of discouraging local villagers from pursuing the exhumation. Doña María was trembling with fear. Local villagers were blaming her for the occupation. Everyone was scared.

We passed more than an hour discussing her options: fleeing to Guatemala City; denouncing the occupation to the national and international press; and/or seeking support from CONAVIGUA—an organization of indigenous widows of the disappeared. Still, to her question, "What should I do?" I had to answer honestly, "I don't know."

Nonetheless, knowing there were options (however limited) calmed her significantly. Then, she began to tell me her story, not in the form of an interview but as an unloading of pain to someone who seemed to understand. She told me that in March 1981, when her husband and fourteen other men were working in the fields, a blue Toyota full of judicial police raced into Xococ.¹¹ They drove through the fields rounding up the men, accusing them of being guerrillas, and killed them. Local villagers buried them at the sites of their deaths. These were the graves that had been disturbed by the patrollers.

Later that day, I spoke with Padre Luis. Although he was clearly concerned about the army presence in Xococ, he maintained his initial interpretation that somehow this had to be some kind of conspiratorial army plot.

Negotiating a Field among Many Truths

Everyone has a truth, and often more than one. Whatever the number, each truth represents certain interests particular to the individual. Although I do not find the truths of Doña María and Padre Luis to be consistent with one another, I do believe that each represents an honest interpretation based on different memory and experience of the same events—based on different structures of understanding that result from different trajectories of meaning. I offer my interpretation, one which I believe allows for the coexistence of two contradictory versions of the

same event which are expressions of structures of understanding that are derived from different trajectories of meaning.

For the priest, his truth about Xococ begins on March 13, 1982, when, under army order, civil patrollers from Xococ massacred seventy seven women and hundred children from Rio Negro.¹² This massacre is the lens through which Padre Luis sees Xococ. As an anthropologist in the field, the Rio Negro massacre is not the lens through which I see Xococ; 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.

It also raises the question of truth. Initially I believed that the issue of truth was compelling because of the very subject matter of my research. Having conducted fieldwork in zones of conflict since 1994, I have come to realize that the issue of truth is ever-present in all aspects of research—whether the researcher chooses to acknowledge this presence is the critical issue. In her book *Framer Framed*, Trinh Minh-ha writes on and of truth: "Being truthful: being in the in-between of all definitions of truth" (1992: 13); "Reality 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 the priest tell me that the fear-stricken woman who sobbed before me embodied deceit.

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 priest, it is easier to fill in the outline of my own agenda than it is to recognize that although I might be able to demonstrate the validity of my hypothesis, this hypothesis may 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 another occasion Padre Luis told me that the Achi do not desire revenge (which they collectively told me they did when I asked the surviving men of Plan de Sánchez what they wanted from the exhumation). A leader of an international human rights mission in Guatemala once commented, “The problem with these people is that they aren’t yet civilized.” Likewise, in Colombia, an international human rights worker from Europe told me that Black Colombians lacked sexual morality, whereas a white 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 colonialist 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” (in this Guatemalan case, the authority being the priest). Thus, Doña María is “suspect” and must be lying, laying a trap, or has been duped by the “bad guys,” and therefore is not authentic because the priest and/or the outside anthropologist know better who truly represents the indigenous community and what “these people need.”

Lata Mani has pointed out that the static framing of agency around the “binary opposition of coercion and consent” is “limited and analytically unhelpful” (1990: 20). Moreover, the researcher viewing the world through this binary lens has little chance of encountering the multiple locations of truth. Truth is not fleeting, it is constant; yet it is heterogeneous and quite subject to tactical interpretations that vary with time and place, among other factors. A massacre survivor in Rabinal explained, “In other times, there was no way to say what had happened even in measured words because they were always nearby surveilling us” (Avila Santa María 1998: 42).

In *Framer Framed* (1992), Trinh says, “I want to find a book that speaks truthfully of Vietnam because everything I read either praises or blames but always in an absolute, black and white, clear cut manner” (1992: 87). The same could be said of most literature on Guatemala. Binary representations of the bloody military versus the liberating guerrillas or the evil ladino versus the innocent Maya tell nothing of the daily struggles for “bare life” confronted by real people in Guatemala. “The witnesses go on living to bear witness to the unbearable” (67). 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 community and culture as “other,” as “exotic,” as somehow having a different level of tolerance in the face of violence based on cultural difference and more than 500 years of conquest. One of the women interviewed in *Framer*

Framed said, “to glorify us is, in a way, to deny our human limits” (72). It seems that often, 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.

Moreover, institutions such as the state and the church, are able to naturalize themselves because of their positions of power. Thus, when doing fieldwork with survivors on the margins, there is always the danger of going to the center of institutional power without realizing that one is there. One could easily travel among the many divisions within indigenous villages in Guatemala without recognizing the role of historic power structures in these divisions. In the case of Xococ, this adds up to Padre Luis being a Spanish liberation theologian and Don Miguel being a principal of *costumbre* (respected religious leader). Moreover, the colonial relationship of the church to the Maya and all its baggage should not be assumed to have disappeared. Everyone has truths that represent interests and power relations grounded in history and practice.

To understand state terrorism in Guatemala, “we need to ‘use’ the past to construct a knowledge that is ‘situated’ and ‘partial’ in its politics” (Mankekar 1993: 238). It seems to me that this “politics” is what Mani, following Mohanty, calls “the politics of simultaneously negotiating not multiple but discrepant audiences, different ‘temporalities of struggle’” (Mani 1990: 6). Thus, if the negotiation of multiple locations of truth(s) with all their discrepancies, rather than binary oppositions of truth, become the lens through which we see the world and how we perceive ourselves in it, we are less likely to accede passively to Padre Luis’s interpretation as the one truth, on the basis of his “authority” and the ease with which a U.S. academic can communicate with a Western priest who is a Spaniard, an intellectual, and a theologian.

Structures of Understanding I

Issues of authority and subjectivity matter to all who work in the field trying to contextualize and sometimes categorize the meaning of surviving genocide and other crimes against humanity.¹³ Ramiro Avila Santa María, an Ecuadorian human rights lawyer and a MINUGUA (United Nations Mission in Guatemala) legal advisor, travels to El Petén during his weekend off to take in the tourist sites, including the Tikal ruins. There, he meets a Maya priest who says: “We gather here each year, priests from all over the country to celebrate Maya ceremonies and, in this way, little by little, we recover our sacred places and our culture. ¿Y usted, qué hace? (And you, what do you do?)”

In his thoughts, Ramiro structures the Maya priest’s identity and his own: He (the Maya priest)

- does not read Spanish, but reads *the nahual*
- indigenous, *q'eqchi'*
- peasant who burns the earth to farm
- Maya priest
- has four sons; two who did not die as nature orders but as the tyrant ordered

I (a visitor in this land)

- read Spanish, but do not understand what I read nor do I know

what I write

- ladino, Latin American
- lawyer
- bureaucrat: I sign papers; respond to calls; greet; give information; I don't sign papers; don't respond; don't greet, don't inform

Ramiro answered the Maya priest with his structure of the moment. He preferred to use the action of what he was doing, the “unbearable noun: *turista*.” Thus, he responded evasively, which allowed him the time to continue thinking about his condition. Remembering that the priest had said the other Maya priests came from all over the country, Ramiro asked, “Where are you from?”

When the priest responded that he was from San Cristobal, “Have you been there?” Ramiro was relieved because “we finally had something in common.” With a smile, Ramiro said, “Of course, I live in Cobán” (which is near San Cristobal). And Ramiro continued to consider his identity and that of the priest:

I

- if I put on a uniform, am a military officer
- if I put on my blue vest and carry my radio, am from MINUGUA
- if I put on a stethoscope, am a doctor
- if I put on a suit, am a lawyer
- if I put on sunglasses and pants, am a tourist

He

- if he demands his land, is a communist
- if his sons are catechists, is a guerrilla
- if he farms his land, is subversive
- if he is indigenous, is fucked—no matter what he puts on.

When the priest asked Ramiro what he did in Cobán, Ramiro told him *todo mi rollo* and gave him his business card. The card has the seal of the United Nations and is imprinted:

MINUGUA

Guatemala

Ramiro Avila Santamaría

Legal Advisor

with address, telephone, and fax numbers, email

Misión de las Naciones Unidas

para la Verificación de los Derechos Humanos en Guatemala

(United Nations Misión for the Verification of Human Rights in Guatemala)

Structures of Understanding II

Three months later in the MINUGUA office in Cobán, the secretary told Ramiro, “A señor who says he met you in el Petén is looking for you.” Ramiro responds, “I will come down.” He recalls, “I said this with all the self-importance that those who are sought out by others have.”

After smiling, greeting one another, and remembering their encounter in Petén, Ramiro and the priest sat down. In Ramiro’s words, “The priest looked at the ground with the sadness of those who suffer when they see a fallen tree.” The priest began to tell his story to Ramiro (the MINUGUA legal advisor in the Cobán office, no longer the tourist in el Petén):

“I am bored.” (Followed by prolonged silence.)

“In 1982, army soldiers carried away my two sons who were catechists. ‘What debt do they have?’ I asked the soldiers who took them. ‘I don’t know,’ they answered, ‘we are following orders.’

“I went to the military base. I talked to another soldier. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. I talked to the lieutenant, to the captain, to the colonel, to the general. With different tones of voice and skin color, they responded to me, ‘I don’t know.’

“I got bored knocking on the doors of army bases, jails, and the ministry of the military. All this for two years and I got bored. So I went and asked if they had seen my sons in the morgue, in the hospital, at the Red Cross. I asked people I knew, people I didn’t know, and neighbors what they might know. ‘I don’t know,’ they told me in the morgue, the hospital, the Red Cross and as did the people I knew and didn’t know and the neighbors some who surely know something and some who surely don’t know anything. I did this for six years and I got bored.” (Followed by silence. Profound, obscure silence.)

Ramiro was “completely aware that the priest was not bored, that I was one more door and that he had placed some kind of hope in me. I felt my impending powerlessness when I asked him, ‘What can I do for you?’ ”

“How can I find my sons?” he asked the MINUGUA legal advisor as he looked straight into Ramiro’s eyes for the first time. Ramiro recalls, “I held my head in my hands, I looked at the ground and very quietly, I told him, ‘I don’t know.’ ”

What We Do Already Know

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, from which Sven Lindqvist draws his title *Exterminate All the Brutes* (1996), is the vehicle both for taking the reader through

his study of European genocide in Africa and also for accompanying Lindqvist in his own modern expedition through the Congo. He closes his journey and his book with the following insight:

And when what had been done in the heart of darkness was repeated in the heart of Europe, no one recognized it. No one wished to admit what everyone knew.

Everywhere in the world where knowledge is being suppressed, knowledge that, if it were made known, would shatter our image of the world and force us to question ourselves—everywhere there, *Heart of Darkness* is being enacted.

You already know that. So do I. It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and draw conclusions (172).

I would like to close this essay with some reflections on Sven Lindqvist's challenges to what we already know, our structures of understanding, trajectories of meaning, and some of the questions that have been raised in the narratives of life experiences with the Vietnam war and La Violencia in Guatemala.

We know that collective memory is a political process. Beyond the personal memories of survivors of violence, we know that U.S. intervention in Vietnam in the 1960s and U.S. military aid to Central America in the 1980s escalated violence against leaders of civil society and destroyed local communities, effectively dismantling peaceful alternatives. We know that the strengthening of local community structures and civil society is key to peacebuilding and post-war reconstruction. One conclusion we can draw from the political memory of Vietnam, Central America, and elsewhere is that effective peacemaking offers citizens alternatives to violence for the resolution of political conflicts. With Vietnam and Guatemala in mind, I would like to shift from memories of violence past to the current war in Colombia. We know that entire communities in Colombia have begun to identify themselves as peace communities, rejecting the militarization of the Colombian army, paramilitaries, and the guerrillas. In Colombia, while twenty civilians lose their lives and 680 citizens flee political violence each day (CODHES 2005), the U.S. government, in 2001 alone, provided more than \$1.3 billion in military aid to Colombia, increasing its fleet of combat helicopters to sixty—twice as many helicopters as the Guatemalan army used in its scorched earth campaign that resulted in the total destruction of 626 villages and ultimately took the lives of 200,000 Guatemalans.

At this writing in May of 2005, it is estimated that more than 3 million Colombians have been internally displaced by the war (CODHES 2005). According to refugees in Ecuador and internally displaced Colombians, these violent displacement operations are joint maneuvers between the paramilitaries and the army. The army frequently uses planes and helicopters to bomb civilian areas,

forcing the inhabitants to flee, while paramilitaries carry out ground maneuvers, destruction of physical community, threats and assassination of those deemed by paramilitary lists to be “subversive” or potentially so (Sanford 2003e and 2003f).

In the Uraba-Choco region of northern Colombia, where I have conducted research since 2000, the paramilitaries control municipalities through alliance with, or representation of, local economic power interests. They act in ways consistent with racketeers or mob bosses, charging for protection and operating like Pinkertons with *carte blanche*. The guerrillas dominate the mountains, the paramilitaries control the rivers and municipalities. The guerrillas are around the rivers and the paramilitaries are around the mountains. The civilians are everywhere in between the guerrillas, paramilitaries, and the army.

The key to paramilitary success in gaining control of the Uraba-Choco region was to violently attack river communities, ultimately displacing more than 45,000 people. The fifty-nine peace communities that exist today represent some 12,000 displaced people who have returned to their lands.

While staying in the peace community of Costa de Oro during the summer of 2001 with Asale Angel-Ajani, we witnessed the tremendous pressures to which communities are subjected. On a humanitarian mission with a social service team from the Diocese of Apartado that accompanied the displacement of the communities of Andalucia and Camelias from a combat zone to Costa de Oro, we were stopped by the guerrillas several times. We were also forcibly removed from our boats at gunpoint by several dozen paramilitaries who twice detained our group—once for about an hour and once for about thirty minutes. The first time the paramilitaries commanded us to beach our small boats on the riverbank, they ordered us into a corridor they had cut into the jungle, and shouted at us to “run like cattle.” As we ran into the jungle, some fifty-three paramilitaries with machine guns and mortar launchers said, “Here are the cattle. What shall we do with them?” However, when they saw our international faces, they began to say, “Good morning, don’t worry. We won’t do anything to you.” This did not, however, stop them from attempting to separate several young men from our group. Father Honelio intervened, telling the commander that if they wanted to talk with one of us, they would have to talk to all of us, effectively informing the commander that if the paramilitaries wanted to kill one of us, they would have to kill all of us; because as Honelio explained, “We will not be separated as a group.” At this, the commander ordered a dozen or so paramilitaries to try to engage the guerrillas on the other side of the river in an exchange of mortar and machine-gunfire. Had the guerrillas responded, the paramilitaries would have had more choices of how to handle us—because civilians often die in crossfire. Fortunately, the guerrillas did not respond.

This is not to paint the guerrillas as innocent actors. We were frequently told, “Both sides kill. The paras kill everyone, the guerrillas are more selective.”

Indeed, when we were there, the paras were seeking to gain territorial dominion by displacing the peace communities, and the guerrillas were seeking to regain territorial dominion by prohibiting villagers in the war zone from displacing.

Shortly after our departure in August, the paramilitaries seized control of several key communities, entered Costa de Oro, and occupied Curvarado—the last town you pass as you head upriver to the peace communities in the heart of the war zone. Paramilitaries killed several Curvarado functionaries, including the municipal secretary who had participated in one of the accompaniment missions. In early September of 2001, the paras were seizing peace community lands, and killed four residents of Puerto Lleras and claimed their land while threatening to kill anyone else who challenged them. That same September, the guerrillas tightened control on river tributaries under their command—as well as prohibiting the diocese teams from entering some communities. In late October of 2001, the paras forcibly recruited two boys from Costa de Oro and the guerrilla ambushed a platoon of paramilitaries, killing at least thirty paramilitaries and reclaiming the territory and populations that the paras had conquered one month earlier. In Curvarado, the guerrillas killed a peasant branded as a paramilitary collaborator. In late October, residents of Costa de Oro were very worried because one of their leaders was on the FARC's list of people to be assassinated. On November 10, Father Honelio and another priest were prohibited from entering Costa de Oro, which was then under definitive guerrilla control. At the time, one observer expressed fear that the paramilitaries would respond to the guerrillas with an even more severe attack on the communities. Indeed, on December 5, 2001, there was a major battle between the guerrillas and the paramilitaries in the town of Rio Sucio in which several hundred civilians were killed, and which caused another wave of displacement of those fearing even greater retaliatory battles. On Christmas Day, 2001, the guerrillas killed two youth leaders in Costa de Oro.

From 2001 to 2002, a series of violent attacks against peace community youth leaders culminated with the assassination of Edwin Ortega, who represented the youth of peace communities internationally and was an outspoken advocate of the right of youth to resist forced recruitment. Rather than abandon their organizing project, peace community youth gathered on October 22, 2002, to restructure their organization, because "It is only through our organization that we have the possibility of a future. Alone, only weapons await us" (Sanford, 2006).

Since November 2002, a negotiating commission (*comisión negociadora*) has been traveling to all the communities of the Lower Atrato. The peace communities celebrated their sixth anniversary in October 2003 with a general assembly of peace communities followed by an international anniversary celebration. A central focus of both the assembly and celebration was the right of youth to organize for peace. "We are here because we want a positive future,"

explained Luis. "We refuse to be targets of the armed actors. We refuse to carry their guns. We want our right to peace respected" (author interview, Costa de Oro, October 17, 2003). In October 2004, the peace communities celebrated their seventh anniversary despite paramilitary, army, and guerrilla tactics of confinement that impeded many communities from actually attending the celebration (author interview, Bogotá, November 12, 2004).

Indeed, we already know enough. We must find the courage to take the lessons learned in our studies of the sequelae of violence and insist that international aid be used to strengthen peaceful alternatives, not escalate wars that disproportionately take the lives of civilians. Throughout the world, survivors come forward to give testimonies not only to denounce a violent past but also to claim a future of peace. Let us not stand by idly waiting for future research opportunities on violence that is currently in the making. We need to move beyond reporting human rights abuses and become effective advocates for peace (Messer 1993). Our fieldwork experiences, research methodologies, and cultural analyses place us in a unique position (Magnarella 1994) to problematize structures of understanding and trajectories of meaning in theory as well as contribute to peace and social justice in practice. As anthropologists, public intellectuals, and human rights advocates, it is our moral obligation not only to share our analytical conclusions about memories of violence but also to place them in new frameworks of understanding for the prevention of violence, so that our research honors the international plea of *Nunca Más*, Never Again

NOTES

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2. See Roberta Culbertson's thoughtful essay on this topic in this volume.
3. See Sanford 2003c.
4. Between 1994 to 1998, I spent some twenty-four months in rural Maya villages before, during, and after exhumations. With the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, I participated in exhumations in Plan de Sánchez, Panzós, San Andrés Sacabajá, Acul, El Tablón, and San Martín Jilotepeque, as well as a preliminary site visit to Xococ.
5. In this volume, Angel-Ajani, Silber, Castillo Hernandez, and Davis, among others, amply demonstrate that casting doubt on victims is a structural tactic of marginalization.
6. Gook is a derogatory term used by U.S. soldiers to dehumanize the Vietnamese.
7. The Achi are one of the twenty-one distinct Maya ethnolinguistic groups.

8. The civil patrol was an army-mandated and controlled, compulsory paramilitary organization composed of all men in rural villages. They were responsible for carrying out all army orders. Begun in the early 1980s, they were not officially disbanded until the signing of the peace accords in December 1996.
9. The military commissioner was the army-appointed civilian commander of the civil patrols charged with implementing army orders and accountable to the army.
10. More than 200,000 Guatemalans were killed or disappeared, and there are 626 known massacres of rural villages. Fully 87 percent of victims were Maya. The Commission for Historical Clarification attributed 93 percent of the violence to the Guatemalan army and 3 percent to the guerrillas.
11. Many Guatemalans, both indigenous and ladino, use the terms *judicial police* and *death squads* interchangeably.
12. For more on Rio Negro, see Sanford 2003a.
13. "Structures of Understanding I and II," drawn from Ramiro Avila Santa María's, 1998 unpublished memoir. Used with kind permission.

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