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Testimonio Transformed: From *I, Rigoberta* to *Guatemala, Nunca más* and
Guatemala, Memoria del silencio

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts

in

Latin American Studies

by

Cristina Metz

Committee in charge:

Professor Milos Kokotovic, Chair
Professor Christine Hunefeldt
Professor Luis Martín-Cabrera

2011

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2011

This work is dedicated to my thesis committee, my family, and to the people about whom I write.

All errors and omissions are entirely my own.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Testimonio Transformed: From *I, Rigoberta* to *Guatemala, Nunca más* and *Guatemala, Memoria del silencio*

by

Cristina Metz

Master of Arts in Latin American Studies

University of California, San Diego, 2011

Professor Milos Kokotovic, Chair

In a country like Guatemala, with a long history of contentious politics and internecine violence, the telling of history often becomes a debate over

"truth" and the "authority" to tell it. For the people most affected by the violence of war, garnering international humanitarian attention is vital and the way in which it was done in this country proved to be polemical. In the 1980s, testimony became a tool of resistance against violence and oppression. Testimony as a tool transformed in the postwar period. It became both a method of collective healing and social justice, as well as an alternative way of constructing a history of violence. This thesis explores *testimonio's* transformation through a comparative analysis of three important texts: Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio* and two truth commission reports known as the CEH report and the REMHI project. All three texts show the socio-historical importance of inscribing subjective and affective versions of "historical truth" into narratives of Guatemala's violent past.

1

Testimonio and the Rigoberta Menchú Controversy

Testimonio is a narrative form readily associated with twentieth-century Third World sociopolitical struggles. In the Central American context, *testimonios* by former guerrilla fighters abound, as do those of witnesses to, or agents of, political struggles. Of all these, one became the focus of a polemical debate within the North American academy: Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú*.¹ The following chapter explores a narrative form that has become a central aspect of truth commission reports. In the 1980s and 1990s, Menchú's testimony thrust Guatemala and its reconciliation process into the international spotlight. During the country's most violent period, *testimonios* evinced a sense of urgency in calling attention to state-sponsored atrocities and gross human rights violations. What happens when the urgency is over is worth exploring since the post-war period demands the articulation of new tasks and the setting of new goals. *Testimonio*, the actual giving of testimony, has come to play an evolving role in the reconciliation process. By first exploring the basic nature of this narrative type, we can then move toward a rethinking of the role of *testimonio*—to be discussed at greater length in subsequent chapters. I do not presume any authority on the matter given that well-

¹ Rigoberta Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, trans. Ann Wright (London, Verso, 1984).

established scholars have themselves had difficulty in reaching any consensus in defining the genre.² This is but a novice's attempt at making an intervention in a discussion that has real extra-textual consequences for many people today.

Defining *testimonio*

In basic terms, testimony is a statement, written or verbal. It is the proof of something provided by the existence of something else. It is the public recounting or declaration of an experience. As a narrative form, it is distinct from the novel because it insists on its commitment to a reality outside of the text. And, it differs from (auto)biography in that it frequently is about a collective, rather than an individual. The referential realities of *testimonios* are usually violent and repressive. These texts are unique in that the voice—the narrator—is neither abstract nor difficult to locate. The narrative voice is that of a real person who exists in a real moment and continues to exist beyond any textual temporality. Furthermore, the real context in which this real person operates also continues its existence outside of the text.³ Three primary markers of a testimonial text differentiate it from others, according to John Beverley. First, it is a work of non-fiction; second, it is concerned with "... a

² Mary Louise Pratt, "I, Rigoberta Menchú and the 'Culture Wars,'" in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, ed. Arturo Arias (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 42. Pratt, for instance, points out that "...we still lack well-developed theoretical frameworks for specifying what testimonio is, how it should be read, produced, taught."

³ John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 42.

problematic collective social situation in which the narrator lives”; third, “the narrator in testimonio . . . speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group, approximating in this way the symbolic function of the epic hero, without at the same time assuming the epic hero’s hierarchical and patriarchal status.”⁴

Testimonio has a long history. Beginning in the 1960s, it became a part of “resistance literature.”⁵ In this period, mass struggle and mobilization gained momentum in Latin America and beyond. People the world over took action against their oppression, marginalization, and disenfranchisement. *Testimonio*-as-resistance emerged from a need, an urgency, to voice experiences of “. . . catastrophe, unjustified massacre, irremediable loss, displacement, trauma, incomplete or inadequate mourning, and anger. . .”⁶ The force of the written word made up for the forced silencing of survivors.

In addition to *testimonios*’ quality of contestation, the actual creation process also adds to the genre’s uniqueness. Typically, these accounts are the result of a collaborative process. An individual gives oral testimony to another (journalist, academic, writer) who transcribes and often translates it. The recorder is a means to an end, which is one aspect of *testimonio* that sets it apart from oral histories. In differentiating these two forms, intentionality is of prime importance. In oral histories, the intention of the recorder takes center-stage whereas in *testimonios* it is the narrator’s intention that matters the

⁴ Ibid., 33.

⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁶ Ibid., 4.

most.⁷ The narrative voice is inextricably tied to the collectivity, though it comes from the individual. Admittedly, the individual shares transformative experiences, but always qua “the collective.” “If it loses this connection,” explains Beverley, “it ceases to become testimonio [...]”⁸ In the connection lies the intention: to raise awareness of the struggle.

The intentionality central to these types of texts makes demands of its readers. The first being an acknowledgement that multiple truths and falsities can exist simultaneously.⁹ What this means is that the narrator presents a history of events that may clash with “official” versions. This is particularly true in cases where the struggle-against is a response to institutionalized violence and repression. Another demand calls on readers to identify with the collective. Usually, the narrating subject makes an appeal to the reader’s moral code:

“The complicity a testimonio establishes with its readers involves their identification—by engaging their sense of ethics and justice—with a popular cause normally distant, not to say alien, from their immediate experience. Testimonio in this sense has been important in maintaining and developing the practice of international human rights and solidarity movements.”¹⁰

Truly, the most vital demand placed on the reader is that of solidarity. It is undeniable that international attention and support has helped and protected the cause of so many vulnerable people, especially in the developing world where violent repression of dissidents goes unchecked. Though *testimonio*

⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ Ibid., 37.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1.

makes these requests of its readers, not all respond in kind; regardless, the reader does not walk away unaffected. In reading testimonial narratives, “[...] we are placed under an obligation to respond; we may act or not on that obligation to respond; we may act or not on that obligation, we may resent or welcome it, but we cannot ignore it. Something is asked of us by testimonio.”¹¹ Demanding something of its readers, however, is but one of *testimonio*’s tasks.

In the Central American case, particularly that of Guatemala, *testimonio* was also about giving “...voice in literature to a previously “voiceless”, anonymous, collective popular-democratic subject, the pueblo or “people”.”¹² In Guatemala, over three decades of armed struggle between the guerrilla and the military effectively caused the death and suffering of innumerable individuals. While political dissidents from all sectors were targeted as subversives by the military, the indigenous community suffered through the worst atrocities and had to do so in silence. Given the urgency and danger of the political situation within the country for much of the 20th century, *testimonio* came to serve many social roles.

Central America in the 1960s and 1970s

In order to understand how it came to pass that a large sector of Guatemala’s population suffered through conditions so harrowingly expressed in testimonial texts, one must look back to the 1960s. Beginning in this decade,

¹¹ Ibid., 1.

¹² Ibid., 36

Central America's geopolitical position forced it into Cold War antagonisms between the Americans and the Soviets. For many years, the United States had jealously guarded the region as its sphere of influence. It came as no surprise, consequently, that the success in 1959 of the Cuban Revolution would color American diplomacy, especially in Guatemala and Nicaragua, for the next several decades. In fact, the overthrow of the Batista regime in Cuba heightened American sensitivity to the threat of communism in its "backyard." The focus of the United States' policy vis-à-vis Central America was containment; that is, the U.S. was interested in ensuring that in no way would communism (or anything that remotely resembled it) take root.¹³

For Central America, the 1960s were years of rapid modernization and some degree of economic prosperity. By the 1970s, however, the situation had worsened throughout the region, with the exception of Costa Rica. "By the late 1970s," according to Booth, Wade, and Walker, "waves of state terror, revolutionary insurrection, counterrevolution, and external meddling engulfed the region, taking over 300,000 lives, turning millions into refugees, and devastating economies and infrastructures".¹⁴ Ongoing fighting between state and opposition forces were generally unequal given that elites were better equipped to fight armed and/or ideological wars. Elites also had the added

¹³ John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change*, 4th ed. (Colorado: Westview Press, 2006), 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

advantage of foreign support.¹⁵ Under such favorable conditions, elites in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua ruled through “military – dominated authoritarian regimes”.¹⁶ The ruthless Somoza regime took control of Nicaragua in the 1930s. In El Salvador, alternating military and authoritarian governments had controlled the country since the 1932 *matanza*. And, in Guatemala, a series of military governments retained power since the 1954 CIA-sponsored coup that overthrew the reformist government of Jacobo Arbenz. The result of all of this is that to this day, the majority of Central Americans remain deeply impoverished; they are “poorly fed, housed and educated, and [have] little or no access to medical care or cultural and recreational opportunities.”¹⁷

In Guatemala, regional trends of impoverishment, civil unrest, and military dominance were acute. Though the decade of the 1970s ushered in rapidly declining socioeconomic conditions, other negative forces had long marred its history. Unequal distribution of land, which dates back to the colonial period, for instance, had been (and continues to be) the greatest obstacle to improving the lives of the majority of Guatemalans. It is one of the root causes of political instability and poverty.¹⁸ The effects of all of these factors had disproportionate consequences for the country’s indigenous

¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸ Ibid., 119.

communities. It is precisely for this population that *testimonio* came to fill a wide range of social roles. One of the primary functions of this style was to garner international support for the guerrilla forces against which the Guatemalan military waged an extremely violent counterinsurgency campaign. For much of the 1970s and early 1980s, the army carried out the worst of its counterinsurgency measures in the Western highlands. These parts of the country were, and remain, largely rural areas with high concentrations of Maya. Communities under attack, as well as guerrilla forces in the region, faced the challenge of finding domestic and international support. Two factors proved challenging to this attempt to garner support. First, the Western highlands are so far removed from the capital that many Guatemalans living outside of the region were, at best, greatly misinformed about counterinsurgent activity and, at worst, completely unaware of the situation. Second, political repression was extremely high in the period between 1981-1983—the high point of state terror. The level of intimidation and repression by force made it necessary to deploy innovative methods of raising consciousness and fomenting solidarity with communities in resistance. This is the key point at which *testimonio* became a useful tool.

Rigoberta Menchú Tells the Story of All Guatemalans

Rigoberta Menchú is the most-readily associated figure with the plight of Guatemala's Maya communities. In the early 1980s, she told her story to the world in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. As a twenty-three-year-old Maya Quiché

woman, Menchú had experienced a lifetime of oppression. In this she was not alone since much of Guatemala's indigenous population has long-suffered cultural and institutional discrimination and racism dating back to the sixteenth century colonial period.¹⁹ Menchu's personal history connects to the consequences of the army's counterinsurgency campaign whose primary victims were rural indigenous communities, though the ostensible target was the guerrilla insurgency. Military campaigns had, by the early 1980s, resulted in the destruction of hundreds of Maya villages, including innumerable deaths and widespread displacement. As a result, Menchú joined thousands of displaced survivors who fled to either other parts of the country or to Mexico.²⁰ Exile provided Menchú with the opportunity to tell her story.

Controversy mired Rigoberta Menchú's testimony from the very beginning. Even the story of its creation is a persistent point of contention since the parties involved tell conflicting stories about the editing process, copyright ownership, and distribution of monetary compensation.²¹ It all began with Menchú's support of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP). This group was one of the most active guerrilla organizations in the highlands at the height of the violence.²² The group employed a tactic of grassroots consciousness-raising more often than armed actions to reach potential

¹⁹ Arias, *Menchú Controversy*, 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²² Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads and US Power* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1991), 137.

supporters in the highlands. Another necessary point of strategy was to reach out to the activist communities outside of Guatemala to gain support and protection for the guerrilla. Sending representatives to other countries, particularly to Europe, put the EGP in contact with influential individuals. Arturo Taracena, “a noted Guatemalan historian and scholar,” was one such representative.²³ Taracena came to play a pivotal role in the creation of Menchú’s testimony. He introduced Menchú to Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, the woman who would serve as her interlocutor. Menchú spent many hours telling her life story to Burgos-Debray, a Venezuelan ethnographer, who listened and transcribed.

What exactly motivated the work behind recording Menchú’s testimony remains unclear. Noted scholar Mary-Louise Pratt explains that Taracena’s motive for introducing Menchú to Burgos-Debray: he “conceived the idea of recording Menchú Tum’s life story as a way of furthering the solidarity work with the Guatemalan opposition in Europe.”²⁴ As mentioned above, one of the differences between *testimonio* and (auto)biography is its intrinsic connection to very real political and social conditions. Clearly, Taracena’s political associations provided the lens through which he viewed Menchú’s life story-told-as-*testimonio*. Her story would serve a specific role in raising support for

²³ Pratt, “*I, Rigoberta*” in Arias, 54.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

the guerrilla movement—all of this in the name of the suffering indigenous and poor ladino communities in Guatemala.

Motive and positionality were also factors in Menchú's decision to tell her story. She presented it not as her own, but as that of "all poor Guatemalans." Her readers know from the outset that it is the testimony "of her people."²⁵ The story she tells is one that is typical of life as either a poor ladino or a poor Indian in Guatemala. Her narrative tells of her life as the child of two indigenous peasants who were part of the migratory peasant labor force in the country. As a child, she too had to work alongside many other Maya, adults and children alike. She tells a story full of sorrow, disappointment, fear, pain, and violence. Nevertheless, for all of the disheartening aspects of her testimony, it is also a tale of empowerment and solidarity. Moved by the plight of her people, she becomes a supporter of groups, such as the EGP, associated with the guerrilla movement. In a way, the story she tells is of her own politicization, which was always in the service of her community. She explains that there came a point when her political consciousness became a real and visceral part of her being:

I started being more aware of the situation. I understood that my bitter experiences, my affection for my *compañeros*, for my people, had made it difficult for me to accept certain things [...] I was by now an educated woman. Not in the sense of any schooling and even less in the sense of being well-read. But I

²⁵ Burgos-Debray, 1.

knew the history of my people, and the history of my *compañeros* from other ethnic groups.²⁶

Menchú's testimony won an award for best testimonial narrative in the 1983 Casa de las Américas Annual Contest. This catapulted Menchú onto the international stage.²⁷ Though she quickly became an important international figure in the indigenous struggle, Menchú remained an elusive figure in the national imaginary of her own country. In 1987 she returned for the first time to her native country as part of a delegation of the Unitary Representation of the Guatemalan Opposition (RUOG). This delegation was "...a civilian, international diplomatic branch of the Guatemalan opposition, operating within the confines of the United Nations."²⁸ By this point, the Guatemalan government, army officials, and a few members of the elite were aware of Menchú's existence, but the population at large had not read or disseminated her testimony to a significant degree. Her first return trip, however, did cause quite a stir largely because of, as Arturo Arias points out, the government's fumbled reaction to it. The government attempted to downplay her arrival by curtailing press and media coverage of it. In effect, this upset the very sectors of society who had the resources to turn her arrival into headlining news. Rigoberta Menchú's fame (infamy for some sectors) was close on the horizon.

²⁶ Ibid., 168-169.

²⁷ Arias, *Menchú Controversy*, 7.

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

The 1990s saw many important events in Guatemala's move toward peace. In 1992, Guatemalans commemorated the 500th year anniversary of Columbus having "discovered" the Americas. For many indigenous groups, this was not a happy occasion. For them, the anniversary served as a reminder of 500 years of suffering the consequences (racism, poverty, violence) of this "discovery." For Menchú, 1992 was a watershed moment in her potential as an activist in the international struggle for indigenous rights. In winning the Nobel Peace Prize—an event that was welcomed by some and scoffed at by others—Menchú became a symbolic figure for Guatemalan national pride and patriotism for society at large, not just for those in the indigenous community. This contributed to a growing misalignment between the government response and that of the people. Arias explains that "...the Ladino political class (professional political sector) for the most part ignored the Nobel ceremony [...] Coverage of the event itself however, was front-page news in all of the country's newspapers, and the major news event in all TV news broadcasts."²⁹ Using her award monies to further her pursuit of advocacy for Guatemala's Maya, Menchú began working to this end through her Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation. According to the Foundation's mission statement, its goal is to defend the rights of indigenous peoples, work in defense of human rights, and to continue the quest for peace.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid., 19.

³⁰ <http://www.frmt.org/es/informaciongeneral.html> accessed 30 March 2010.

Exposing Rigoberta: David Stoll and the “Culture Wars”

While Rigoberta Menchú continued her activist and humanitarian work, a North American anthropologist prepared his “exposé” of Menchú’s testimonial narrative. In 1999, anthropologist David Stoll published *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All of Poor Guatemalans*.³¹ In this book, he embarks on a project that will “set the record straight” by clearing up inconsistencies in Menchú’s testimony. Stoll was in Guatemala conducting fieldwork in the years following the publication of Menchú’s testimony. He claims that he did not doubt the story contained therein until 1987 when he conducted a “routine atrocity check” that failed to show that Menchú’s brother had been burned to death in Chajul plaza as her story goes.³² From the outset Stoll asks much from his readers who, in order to make it through to the end of the monograph, must put aside their skepticism about how genuine his stated intentions actually were when he set out to expose Menchú’s inaccuracies. This is especially difficult to do because Stoll concedes that though Menchu’s tale might not be absolutely true, the important things are: the massacre of thousands of Indians, that half of her family was killed, that she fled to Mexico.³³ Ultimately, the book leaves readers with one resounding question:

³¹ David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the story of all poor Guatemalans*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999).

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, viii.

why? If the experience of violence is true, why delve deeper to find instances of inaccuracies that are irrelevant to the larger picture?

In the introduction, Stoll explains the value of his work. One of his primary motivations is to discern why Menchú's family and her village experience the calamity she describes.³⁴ Menchú states in her *testimonio* that her story is not an individual one, that it is representative of a collective experience. Stoll's apparent problem with this is that it is not the story of *all* Guatemalans and that this generalization glosses over important nuances. To begin with, the frequent explanation for why the violence happened is that the Guatemalan military practiced extreme counterinsurgency methods. For Stoll, that explanation does not account for all that occurred at the local level. He rhetorically asks: "Was the guerrilla movement defeated in the early 1980s a popular struggle expressing the deepest aspirations of Rigoberta's people? Was it an inevitable reaction to grinding oppression, by people who felt they had no other choice?"³⁵ Here Stoll speculates about several different things. First, he casts doubt as to whether the guerrilla movement had an actual, organic connection to the oppressed peoples of Guatemala. His answer seems to be no. The second question implicitly denies the very real experience of specific sectors of the population who experienced oppression and marginalization. It denies them political agency. These people did not

³⁴ Ibid., ix.

³⁵ Ibid., ix.

simply “feel” that they had no other choice but to turn to the guerrillas for help. To a great degree, they were not privy to the internal power dynamics of the Guatemalan state. The political apparatus, including officially sanctioned paths for enacting social change, were not open to the country’s poor and oppressed, Maya or ladino.³⁶ It is true, many participants in either the insurgency or military, did not make an independent conscious choice to fight one way or the other. Still, many others did “feel” the reality of the matter—that they did not have an official outlet to vent their frustration—and so reacted by consciously joining the guerrilla.

Another possible motive behind Stoll’s exposé resides in what he says about the reception of Menchú’s testimony in Guatemala and abroad. He explains that Menchú’s story was easy to accept because it fit with what people “knew” to be the experience of Indians since Spanish colonization. Furthermore, it came at a time when North American intellectuals were theorizing about multiculturalism in a way that challenged beliefs about legitimacy and truth vis-à-vis knowledge and its production.³⁷ Stoll’s intention may have been to make an intervention in this ongoing discussion. Nevertheless, the way in which he dispels the romanticized myths surrounding the Indian experience and the way he exposes how the realities have been glossed over comes across as an effort to blame the victim. He, for instance,

³⁶ Marta Elena Casús Arzú, *Guatemala: linaje y racismo* (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2007), 127.

³⁷ Stoll, 5.

argues: “If anyone ignited political violence in Ixil country, it was the Guerrilla Army of the Poor. Only then had the security forces militarized in the area and turned it into a killing ground.”³⁸ He goes on to say that

This chapter delves into the ecology behind such exertions [i.e. peasants having to travel long distances with heavy loads], a degenerative process of population growth, slash-and-burn agriculture, and migration that is complicated, but not necessarily altered in any fundamental sense, by the ladino-indígena conflict [...] Romanticizing peasants is a hoary tradition that has the virtue of dramatizing their right to land [...] [it] can also be used to ignore the damage that peasants do, how they compete for fresh land, and the feuds that result [...]³⁹

Since *I, Rigoberta Menchú* fails to mention land disputes among peasants, it proves Menchú’s biased representation of indigenous life. Stoll says Menchú is not alone as “[...] this reflects a view of indigenous peasants that is widely held on the left and sometimes voiced by indígenas themselves.”⁴⁰ He refers to the assumptions that Indians have a strong sense of solidarity and that “conflicts are vertical.” Stoll wonders if this is true. In his estimation it is more likely that “...a heroic view of peasants blinds us to the possibility that they consider their main problem to be one another. It also blinds us to the possibility that instead of resisting the state, peasants are using it against other members of their own social class.”⁴¹ In one fell swoop, Stoll accuses

³⁸ Ibid., 9.

³⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 31.

⁴¹ Ibid., 31.

opposition groups of bringing the army's wrath upon themselves and argues that Indians are their own worst enemies. But it does not end there.

Responses to Stoll's Allegations

Many of Stoll's remarks demonstrate an underlying antagonism between himself and certain North American academics. To begin with, he acknowledges that some critics might view his book as yet another tool with which the Guatemalan military can maintain its political domination and impunity in light of the atrocities it committed.⁴² In his own defense, Stoll claims to be a path breaker of sorts given that "...no one had ever interviewed Rigoberta's old neighbors to compare their stories with hers."⁴³ One reason he gives for this is that sympathizers of the left viewed Menchú's *testimonio* as a "stirring example of resistance to oppression" and "as an authoritative text."⁴⁴ It is clear that in Stoll's opinion, Menchú's text not only lacks authority equal to that of refereed scholarly work, it leaves many gaps in its wake that Stoll must fill.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Stoll would like to set the boundaries of the debate concerning Menchú's story. In his view, sympathies with the left have blinded those who have used it as an exemplary representation of oppression. In contrast, those who approach it critically (as he does) do so as objective authorities on the matter. Stoll's defense of objective authority is, as Carol A.

⁴² Ibid., ix.

⁴³ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 15.

Smith explains, symptomatic of a larger trend that complicated the figure of the “white first-world” male academic.⁴⁶ While a discussion of this trend does fall outside the bounds of this paper, it is necessary to point out that in attempting to reiterate his right to an authoritative voice at the expense of Menchú’s credibility, Stoll provided the match to a firestorm of debate dubbed “the Rigoberta Menchú controversy.”

A *New York Times* article published in December 1999 fanned the flames that Stoll’s exposé had sparked. This front-page article cast considerable doubt as to the authenticity of Menchú’s story. It manipulated Stoll’s allegations in order to make it seem like everything Menchú relayed in her *testimonio* had been outright lies. In addition, the article reduced the points of contention the land dispute that Menchú’s father was embroiled in for decades, Menchú’s version of the deaths of her brothers, and the level of formal schooling she received.⁴⁷ It incensed North American academics, Guatemalan intellectuals, and the *testimonio*’s collaborators—Menchú, Burgos, and Taracena.⁴⁸ A series of articles quickly appeared in European and Latin American dailies (mainly in Spain and Guatemala). Stoll’s accusations also made the social circuit given that, by then, Menchú herself was on good terms

⁴⁶ Carol A. Smith, “Why Write an Exposé of Rigoberta Menchú?” in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, ed. Arturo Arias (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 151.

⁴⁷ Larry Rohter, “Tarnished Laureate” in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, ed. Arturo Arias (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 58-65.

⁴⁸ Arias, 51.

with many heads of state, was a leader in “native and subaltern people’s” struggle for human rights, and her text was on the reading lists of many North American high schools and universities.⁴⁹

In Guatemala, the response to the *New York Times* article and to Stoll’s allegations, expectedly, came in the form of a split between supporters of Menchú and her opponents. Just days after the controversial article, Carolina Escobar Sarti, a noted Guatemalan journalist, wrote:

That any person should choose to cast a pall on Rigoberta’s words because of their racial and ethnic prejudice, or because of their social and economic status, can be understood (even if not accepted), but that an academic should spend ten long years of his life researching, without scientific rigor, a case in which he reaches conclusions of such little value is more than regrettable.⁵⁰

Another noted Guatemalan columnist, Jorge Palmieri, came out in support of Stoll’s “unmasking.” His opinion piece in *El Periódico de Guatemala* claims that anyone who speaks out against Menchú is doing so under threat of being called “racist, *machista*, an extreme right-winger, a McCarthyite.”⁵¹ Much like Stoll, Palmieri makes martyrs of those who would persevere in the face of such threats, compelled by a need to denounce Menchú’s entirely exaggerated at best, or entirely false, at worst, version of events.

⁴⁹ Arias, 52.

⁵⁰ Carolina Escobar Sarti, “A Hamburger in Rigoberta’s Black Beans,” in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, ed. Arturo Arias (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 127-129.

⁵¹ Jorge Palmieri, “Lies by the Nobel Prize Winner,” in *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*, ed. Arturo Arias (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 73.

North American academics also participated in the polemical discussion from a diverse range of positions. Some, such as Mary Louise Pratt, detail the conditions that opened up a space for Stoll to write such an exposé. Pratt explains that Menchú's testimony became part of undergraduate reading lists in the 1980s. This decade marked a height in the "culture wars" of the U.S. academe. These "wars" were actually clashes between new faculty who had participated in the U.S. civil rights movements and counterculture of the 1960s and older faculty who represented the conservative right.⁵² These debates took place in the halls of some of the most prestigious universities in the country. At Stanford, the controversy came to encompass the literary canon used to teach undergraduate literature classes. New faculty advocated for inclusion of non-traditional texts that took into account voices from the marginalized and subaltern, particularly those of the developing world. Older faculty held tightly to their belief that students should read the Classics, that is, Euro- and male-centric texts. Pratt explains how the "battle of the books" quickly clouded the true stakes: ". . . how to transform cultural capital in a society of the Americas that has decided to recognize and develop itself as multiethnic, heterogeneous, democratic, and postcolonial."⁵³ On the heels of this academic in-fighting, undergraduate students read Menchú's testimony, sometimes as their first foray into a world outside of their own. Pratt, who

⁵² Pratt, "*I, Rigoberta*" in Arias, 30.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 34.

included Menchú's testimony in her syllabi, believed that its potential impact was as an antidote for First World alienation from Third World suffering. She says, "Its construction as a personal, experiential narrative has the power to break down the distancing strategies that normally govern young Americans' encounters with their racial and economic others."⁵⁴ Without a doubt, its eye-opening power was reason enough to promote a wider readership of testimony.

On a professional level, the real issue of intellectual authority pushed the benefits of reading *I, Rigoberta*, and the lived experiences it highlights into the background. For Pratt, the controversy raises issues of the production of knowledge (epistemology), how we obtain said knowledge (methodology), and what we do to get it and why (ethics). For those who specialize in Guatemala, Menchú's *testimonio* is upheld as a source that ". . . reflect[s] richly and plausibly the historical reality it addresses."⁵⁵ Readers who are surprised to learn that Menchú did not experience or see firsthand everything she mentions in the book perhaps misunderstand the conventions of *testimonio*. But Stoll, a person immersed in academic debates and critical theorizing, should have had enough knowledge about the technical aspects of testimony and of the deeper motives propelling the story forth to see how lambasting Menchú so aggressively would cause so much controversy. Fortunately, other North American intellectuals have shown much more finesse in confronting the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 41.

underlying issue Menchú's *testimonio*, which is that it challenges their notions of "history, narrative, and truth" and who has the authority over these.⁵⁶ In Pratt's final estimation, Stoll's book is a manifestation of "unjustified aggression" but it also is an opportunity to openly debate the "state of the field" and the "geopolitics of truth".⁵⁷

Other academics share a similar point of view to the extent that they believe Stoll's intervention is one that can open a discussion about North American academia. Kay B. Warren, for example, analyzes Stoll's exposé from a more sympathetic perspective. She proposes that considering Stoll less "as an ideologically motivated outlaw" and more "as someone who reveals telling dilemmas that have propelled the discipline [i.e. cultural anthropology] into the new millennium" would reap greater benefit.⁵⁸ Warren goes on to say that, as with so many texts, *testimonio* can be approached from a number of different positions, and that Stoll ". . . needs to be understood as one of a host of possible readings . . . whose differences spring from the ways the truth value of the book is conceived."⁵⁹ Various readings are possible, though not all carefully consider the content or extra-textual impact. A few scholars argue this point convincingly. Anthropologist Carol Smith addresses Stoll's method of discrediting Menchú, which includes points about ". . . guerrilla warfare,

⁵⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁸ Kay B. Warren, "Telling Truths: Taking David Stoll and the Rigoberta menchú Exposé Seriously" in Arias, 199.

⁵⁹ Warren, "Telling Truths" in Arias, 205.

indigenous support for revolution in Guatemala, the extent of and reasons for indigenous poverty, and the impact of multiculturalism and the ‘new standards of truth.’”⁶⁰ Her conclusion reiterates what experts on Guatemala have come to accept: that fault for the deaths and displacement of a large sector of the population rests squarely on the army. This is in direct contrast to Stoll’s conclusion that the military attacked only when provoked by the guerrillas and collaborators.

For many people, Stoll’s exposé clearly elicits strong reactions. Within Guatemala, there were two primary reactions. For some, it came across as a pointless attack against Menchú. In contrast, more conservative readers embraced it as a legitimization of their own Cold War, counterinsurgency bias. North American scholars have addressed the issues it brings up for the academe in terms of what is historical “truth” and who has the authority to tell it. Others have justifiably asked what is the point of writing such an exposé when the larger truth—the one that matters for a host of reasons that have real time implications—is undeniable and long established. Another scholar who intervened in the controversy, Claudia Ferman, is surprised by all of the attention Stoll received and asserts that if it had not been for the *Times* article, Stoll’s book would have gone unnoticed.⁶¹ And still other scholars cannot get beyond why Stoll would feel so compelled to expose the “lies” knowing that

⁶⁰ Smith, “Why Write an Exposé of Rigoberta Menchú?” in Arias, 143.

⁶¹ Claudia Ferman, “Textual Truth, Historical Truth, and Media Truth: Everybody Speaks about the Menchú’s” in Arias, 159.

doing so would pull a cloak over more important issues. Lovell and Lutz share this bewilderment:

Like many whose work pertains to Guatemala, we find ourselves not only puzzled by the manner in which David Stoll (1999) approaches the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú (1984) but also perplexed that Stoll's dissection of the debatable details of one individual's life serves to divert attention from the undeniable deaths of thousands of others.⁶²

In the same vein, Misha Kokotovic marvels at the way that "critics have devoted relatively little attention to the experiences of oppression and exploitation communicated in *testimonio*. . . ." ⁶³ This is ultimately what is so offensive about Stoll's exposé: it set off a controversy that took on a very narcissistic mood. Some of those critics who responded did so from a need to defend a particular theoretical or conceptual perspective. The lives contained within the testimonial text suffered the consequences. At moments when their horrific experiences should have ignited readers to act, debates over intellectual authority and representation took center-stage.

In the end, *testimonio* is a means to communicate something real. As I have discussed here, it is a textual representation used by subaltern subjects to make an intervention in the historical record. It is produced as collaboration between two individuals from disparate backgrounds (the subaltern testifier

⁶² W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz, "The Primacy of Larger Truths: Rigoberta Menchú and the Tradition of Native Testimony in Guatemala" in Arias, 171.

⁶³ Misha Kokotovic, "Theory at the Margins: Latin American Testimonio and Intellectual Authority in the North American Academy," *Socialist Review* 27.3-4 (1999): 31.

and the intellectual interlocutor) with very specific ends. In the 1980s testimony was a way for individuals, such as Rigoberta Menchú, to garner international support and attention for their cause. It is true, Menchú did have a politically charged motive for telling her story, but in essence, it is a story of misery, violence, and suffering. The experiences she shares, as many scholars discussed here have pointed out, are real and they are the experiences of a significant number of Guatemalans. In its moment, *testimonio* was a product of an urgency that compelled representatives of the marginalized and oppressed to spread the word. By the 1990s, *testimonio*—especially Menchú's—came under fire from those who would still hold true to a Cold War mentality.

***Testimonio* and Its New Place in Guatemala's Peace Process**

For Guatemala, *testimonio* holds a new task. In the post-war period ushered in after the peace treaty signed in 1996 by representatives of the Guatemalan state (understood as the army) and the URNG, testimony is taking on a new role in the reconciliation process. In the chapters that follow, I will explore the ways testimony-as-resistance and testimony-as-contestation transformed into testimony-as-historical memory and testimony-as-tactics of peace through two truth commission reports.

2

From Resistance to Peace: *Testimonio's* Transformation through the REMHI Project

Introduction: Testimony as History

In the 1980s, testimony was a form of resistance that people like Rigoberta Menchú used in order to raise awareness of a specific cause or issue. Through Guatemala's peace process, *testimonio* transformed. It became a vital part of two projects that sought to write a new history of the country's armed conflict. One of these projects is the focus of this chapter. In 1994, a sector of Guatemala's Catholic Church formed an office of human rights that embarked on a project to recover the historical memory of those who had been affected by or had been directly involved in violence related to the armed conflict. This project, called "Recuperación de la memoria histórica" (REMHI), collected and incorporated testimonies in a way that narrowed the distance between interlocutor and subject.

The REMHI project's organizers had a clear ideological position that informed its approach to the collection and use of *testimonio*. In order to understand how the REMHI project incorporated testimonies into its final report, I will first discuss how a call for historical clarification became part of the peace process and resulted in a truth commission. The Church's human rights office responded to this call by declaring that its role would be to do

what a government-sanctioned truth commission could not do. In order to recover a silenced history of the people, the Church created the REMHI report, whose principle supporters believed in a psycho-social-historical approach to clarifying Guatemala's difficult past.

I propose that the REMHI report be read as the product of a two-fold project—one that gathered testimonies within a clearly defined methodological framework and one that projected its significance and effects into the ongoing peace process beyond the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. This will allow for conclusions about the deliberate interweaving of the social, the political, and the reconciliatory through testimony. What we see in this particular report is the urgency of *testimonio* redefined to reflect a need for cathartic release on the part of the survivors. The REMHI report is less about finding quantifiable, certifiable evidence of atrocities and more about providing a record of experiences by survivors, though it does both. In effect, this allows those Guatemalans outside of institutional networks of political and social power to have a stake in the peace process, particularly in the writing of history itself. In its process, in its method, in its inclusion of multiple voices, this report continues to hold power more than 10 years after its publishing.

Peace Calls for a Truth Commission with Limit

Achieving peace in Guatemala and in Central America in general was a

long process spanning most of the 1980s to the early 1990s.⁶⁴ In 1983, the governments of Colombia, Mexico, Panamá, and Venezuela participated in a peace initiative with the end goal of settling the political tumult in the Central American region. Three years later, the presidents of the five Central American countries took up the gauntlet and met at a summit in Esquipulas, Guatemala to construct a comprehensive regional peace plan. In 1987, a second summit resulted in the Esquipulas II Agreement, “Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America.” The United Nations backed this agreement, though the organization itself would not take an active, on-the-ground role in the Guatemalan peace process for another three years. In 1990, at the request of the government of Guatemala and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG), the United Nations began overseeing the peace process. Over the course of the next six years, the United Nations facilitated a series of agreements between the two parties that paved the way for the final agreement for a “firm and lasting peace” and that set the agenda for the immediate post-war years. One of these agreements expressed a desire to inscribe the experience of violence into the historical record.

The “Agreement on the Establishment of the Commission to Clarify Past Human Rights Violations and Acts of Violence that Have Caused the

⁶⁴ United Nations. *The Guatemalan Peace Agreements* (New York, NY: United Nations, Department of Public Information, 1998), 1-2.

Guatemalan Population to Suffer,” signed on 23 June 1994, established the need for a truth and reconciliation commission. Working under several premises—that violence marred the country’s recent past, that Guatemalans had a right to know the “whole truth,” and a strong desire to end the armed conflict—the government of Guatemala and the URNG agreed to a certain kind of peace and a certain kind of commission. The interest of the two parties was of promoting “. . . a culture of harmony and mutual respect that will eliminate any form of revenge or vengeance [as a] prerequisite for a firm and lasting peace”⁶⁵ Given that revenge and vengeance were not conducive to peace, the intellectual architects of this agreement placed considerable limitations on the commission called *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*⁶⁶ (CEH).

The agreement to establish a commission to clarify the past limited from the outset the future truth commission in three important ways. First, the primary purpose of the CEH would be to “clarify with all objectivity” Guatemala’s internal armed conflict. This meant that it could not individualize responsibility for crimes it uncovered. Second, the agreement limited the commission to a specific period of operations. It could not begin its work until the government and the URNG reached a formal peace accord. This would happen two years later, but back in 1994, it was anybody’s guess how long it

⁶⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁶ Commission for Historical Clarification

would actually take. One final constraint concerned the commission's actual composition. Officially, the it would consist of three members: (1) a moderator of the peace negotiations appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General; (2) a Guatemalan national of "irreproachable conduct" as appointed by the Moderator; and (3) one academic from a list of candidates provided by the University.⁶⁷ In addition, the CEH could hire support staff that met pre-determined criteria. Determining the leadership of the commission in this way could potentially influence people's perception of it as an inorganic part of the peace process. The CEH's foreign-ness could on the one hand be beneficial because it would avoid losing credibility by association with either one of the opposing parties. On the other hand, by not being a grassroots effort, and because of its direct connection to the United Nations, Guatemalans most affected by the violence and whose testimonies were fundamental to the final report might have a hard time seeing it as an autochthonous effort toward peace.

Such limitations were not lost on particular sectors of the Guatemalan population. Specifically, within the Catholic Church, there were individuals who recognized the limits of what the CEH could do. One effort to combat the

⁶⁷ The *Agreement on the Establishment of the Commission to Clarify Past Human Rights Violations and Acts of Violence* does not clarify which university this list would come from. This writer assumes that it would come from the Universidad de San Carlos (USAC) because it is one of the most important public universities in the country, though there are several other private universities that it could have come from.

restrictions under which the commission would have to operate came in the form of an alternative and complementary “recovered” history, *Guatemala: Nunca más*.

The Church Responds

In 1989, Archbishop Próspero Penados del Barrio established the *Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala* (Guatemalan Archdiocese’s Office of Human Rights) and appointed Bishop Juan Gerardi Conedera as its founding director.⁶⁸ Bishop Gerardi, who also went by the honorific title Monsignor Gerardi, had for years been a trusted friend and advisor to Archbishop Penados.⁶⁹ Bishop Gerardi was particularly suited to his new role as director of ODHAG because of his strong tie to Guatemala’s Maya Catholic communities. For the first two decades of his priesthood, he served in towns and villages with high Maya populations.⁷⁰ In those years, he ministered to the poor in rural areas that were most affected by the decades-long civil war. From his early exposure to rural communities with large populations of Maya, Bishop Gerardi became a strong advocate for his parishioners. In 1967, for instance, he was sent to the diocese of Verapaz and “...pioneered the implementation of Mayan-language Masses...encouraged his priests to learn Q’eqchi and trained and sponsored Q’eqchi-speaking

⁶⁸ Francisco Goldman, *The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?* (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 4, 21.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

catechists....”⁷¹ He was pivotal in expanding the Church’s ability to truly connect to its people by learning the language and customs of its parishioners.

The war also had a personal impact on Bishop Gerardi’s life. Not only did he become a witness of terrible violence inflicted on the people of Verapaz, he himself also became a target of the military for his public denouncement of such violence. Following his appointment as bishop of Verapaz, he became the bishop of El Quiché, one of the most affected areas throughout the war. By virtue of his religious vocation, Monsignor Gerardi was as much at risk as were catechists and other religious in the region. In protest of the atrocities occurring in El Quiché at the hands of the military, he closed down the diocese and spent the next three years in forced exile.⁷²

By the time he left Guatemala, Bishop Gerardi had already made an impression on others who were just as motivated as he was to protect the victims of the military’s repression. It was his good friend, Archbishop Penados, who petitioned for Bishop Gerardi’s return from exile. Monsignor Gerardi’s appointment as head of ODHAG in 1989 strengthened the support and deep admiration many Guatemalans already had for him and for his activism. As director, he deepened his commitment to the right to and dignity of life, especially that of the Maya. He continued receiving death threats for this, as well as for his active participation in the peace negotiations, but this did not

⁷¹ Ibid., 11-12.

⁷² Ibid., 19.

slow him down.⁷³ During his tenure, Bishop Gerardi became the most ardent supporter of a project whose product would be a Church-sponsored truth and reconciliation report.

Establishing the REMHI Project

The Recovery of Historic Memory project (Recuperación de la memoria histórica, hereafter REMHI) began in 1994—two years before the signing of the Peace Accords and the beginning of work by the United Nations' own truth and reconciliation commission (*Comisión para el esclarecimiento histórico*—CEH). The REMHI project began as a part of the Archdiocese of Guatemala's Office of Human Rights (ODHAG). It did not have the official sanction of either the Guatemalan government or the United Nations. The intellectual architects of this project, including Bishop Gerardi, foresaw the limitations that the CEH would face given that the accords expressly prohibited it from individualizing culpability or carrying out any legal procedures. The vision of the REMHI organizers, then, was to support the CEH while at the same time going beyond what the UN commission could actually do.⁷⁴ They acknowledged from the beginning that the CEH was limited in what it could do. One might assume that already, from the outset, whatever the CEH could do would not be enough. In

⁷³ Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, "La verdad es nuestra fuerza: Caso Gerardi," ODHAG, <http://www.odhag.org.gt/07videos.htm> (accessed July 1, 2010).

⁷⁴ Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala, *Guatemala: Nunca Más, Informe Proyecto Interdiocesano de Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica*, vol. 1, xix. Hereafter, REMHI.

truth, the REMHI needed the UN for protection, thus it would have been unwise to offend it. Nevertheless, it felt the urgency of filling in the gaps that the CEH would inevitably leave. As the project progressed, it began to take on a new role: “. . . REMHI se convirtió en un esfuerzo alternativo y complementario. . . . Nosotros tendríamos más facilidad para acercarnos a las comunidades, mientras que la Comisión podría ser más fructuosa en las instancias oficiales y de poder”.⁷⁵ As can be seen, REMHI would be in dialogue with the CEH report to the extent that one could deal with the state and the other with the people. In addition, REMHI’s role would be an alternative in the sense that it could do things in ways that the CEH could not, such as include the names of specific perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

Independently of the UN-sponsored CEH, organizers of the REMHI project established clear needs that the project would attempt to meet. Most important of all were the needs of the people for peace and reconciliation.⁷⁶ These included a need for the acknowledgement of their suffering, a space for the voices to be heard, homage to their dead and disappeared, and a rebuilding of the people’s self-esteem. In other words, REMHI would dignify those who for so long had been violently deprived of worth. Another need the REMHI organizers sought to fill was an intervention in the historical record that would account for political violence and the gravest human rights violations

⁷⁵ REMHI, vol. 1, xx.

⁷⁶ Ibid., xi.

committed by the Guatemalan military over the course of 36 years against the individuals and entire indigenous communities.⁷⁷ According to them, the long years of violence were in nature fratricidal and led to a chasm within society—it disrupted the social fabric.

The REMHI project had given itself a tall order. It set out to do what it did not believe a governmental body could do. It would not censor testimonies that mentioned individual perpetrators. It would also widen its lens of interpretation to see the conflict not as a strictly binary counterinsurgent war in which civilian suffering was simply collateral damage. REMHI organizers viewed violence in Guatemala as rooted in sociohistorical processes with psychosocial consequences. How it would infuse its position in its work remained unclear. For this, however, the REMHI project found in Ignacio Martín-Baró's work inspiration and an example to follow.

Fraying the Social Fabric: Ignacio Martín-Baró S.J. and the Salvadoran Civil War

Writing in the 1980s, in the midst of a civil war that ravaged El Salvador, Ignacio Martín-Baró did what many academics do even today: he connected the living horrors of war he witnessed all around him with his academic's knowledge of psychology. Martín-Baró was a Spanish Jesuit priest who held a

⁷⁷ Ibid.

doctorate in psychology.⁷⁸ Following the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was assassinated on March 24, 1980 while giving Mass, many members of the clergy, fled El Salvador.⁷⁹ Many others, however, including Martín-Baró, chose to stay.

Martín-Baró's primary motivation for staying was to live his hope for the discipline of psychology. He hoped to intervene in a shift in the field of psychology that would strengthen the connection between academic or intellectual production and humankind—to place social research “in the service of humankind.”⁸⁰ His work thus focused on defining trauma as a consequence of war, exploring the social aspects of trauma, and examining the instrumental value of violence.

Locating the social consequences of war-related trauma involved first defining it from a psychological perspective. In psychological terms, trauma refers to

...the psychic problems brought on by the impact of a particular experience or life situation....no body organ is affected but one begins to suffer disorders in one's normal functioning, in one's thinking and feeling, in one's behavior or abilities.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ignacio Martín-Baró. *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*. Ed. Adrienne Aron and Shawn Corne (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1994), 104.

⁷⁹ U.S. Catholic, “Archbishop Oscar Romero,” U.S. Catholic, http://www.uscatholic.org/oscar_romero (accessed January 17, 2011).

⁸⁰ Martín-Baró, 15.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

The conditions of war provide a plethora of experiences and situations that humans are generally not psychically equipped to deal with, such as mass killings, rape, extreme violence, and displacement. So, even though one remains physically unscathed, what suffers is the psyche. A witness to a traumatic event may be able to function perfectly well physically, but in psychological terms, something has ruptured.

Martín-Baró took one step beyond the strictly psychological, individualized definition of trauma. In an effort to apply this definition to the particular setting of El Salvador at war, Martín-Baró proposed a three-pronged model of psychosocial trauma in an effort to understand the material conditions implicated in social trauma. According to Martín-Baró, psychosocial trauma is “dialectical,” it has social origins, and it can be chronic.⁸² Trauma affects the individual’s psyche, especially in its ability to process external events. It also, however, is a product of specific social relations, which, for Martín-Baró writing in El Salvador, was war stemming from deeply unequal social relations. In sum, trauma is felt individually and it is produced by society, and therefore, it is a part of certain social relations. Trauma, in effect, has a sociohistorical character.

War and political violence are material conditions that have the unique ability to affect individuals in their role as social actors, a phenomenon he

⁸² Ibid., 124.

labeled as psychosocial trauma.⁸³ What Martín-Baró observed in El Salvador was that the conditions of war created two critical problems for social life in the country. First, the root causes of civil war usually are unequal relations among social classes. These unequal relations lead to exploitation and a general disregard for the rights and dignity of subordinated classes. Relationships based on deep inequalities are abnormal, but one particularly sinister effect of war, besides psychosocial trauma, is that it makes these normal.

Making the abnormal normal was the second critical problem Martín-Baró identified. The notion of “social ‘normal abnormality’” involves two key aspects. First, war and political violence traumatize the individual on a personal level. Second, they also traumatize the individual on a social—collective—level. Psychosocial trauma affects individuals in their ability to “construct their identities and develop their lives within the network of these dehumanizing relations.”⁸⁴ Martín-Baró applied this concept to his study of the effects of war on children. He noted that children responded to extreme violence in one of two ways. Some children reacted to the trauma of war by adopting a “defensive desensitization.”⁸⁵ The experience of violence was so emotionally and psychologically overwhelming that it pushed some children to just shut down. By adopting a defensive desensitization, children appeared rather cold and disconnected because it was the only way for them to retain

⁸³ Ibid., 124.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 126.

some sense of psychological stability. Another reaction to violence, a less negative one, was to activate a degree of “psychic resistance.”⁸⁶ Though war and trauma have few positive impacts, “psychic resistance” motivated the individual (or the group) to become politically committed to a cause and stand in solidarity with others.

Admittedly, Martín-Baró emphasized the experiences of children in war, but many of his conclusions applied to the Guatemalan case. The REMHI report, for example, draws a connection between militarization and children that echoes Martín-Baró’s conclusions: “From fear of aggression or death to the *normalization* of violence as a way of life, children were influenced by the warlike socialization patterns of life in a militarized environment.”⁸⁷ For children in Guatemala, where the war lasted almost four decades, the aspects of war that remained constant were the fear and normalization of violence through forced recruitment of military patrols and near-constant presence of soldiers and civil patrollers. One of the social aspects of violence that Martín-Baró identified as being especially damaging was its cyclical nature. If violence and its effects repeat if left untreated. Unequal social relations, as noted above, generate violence against others, which results in individual trauma. The traumatized individual then joins a larger social body of trauma because the conditions that led to the original violence remain intact and, in fact, reproduce

⁸⁶ Ibid., 128.

⁸⁷ Human Rights Office, Archdiocese of Guatemala. *Guatemala: Never Again!* Abridged. trans. Gretta Tovar Siebentritt (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 36.

themselves through war, collusion, and repression.⁸⁸ For the REMHI project, this was especially poignant given that its task of collecting testimonies involved reaching entire communities suffering past traumas in a present moment where unequal conditions pre-dating the traumatic event persisted.

Violence as a response by government to internal or external threat is, and has been, discursively presented as a last resort. In the 1980s, Martín-Baró noticed that in El Salvador, violence (physical and psychological) was fast becoming the first and only response. In Guatemala, testing ground for Cold War counterinsurgency tactics, this had long been the case.⁸⁹ Martín-Baró signaled the use of violence as a means to an end (of “getting what one wants”), rather than as psychopathic response, to be a lasting effect of protracted war. What he could not have known for sure, though he strongly speculated that it was so, was that trauma was not a byproduct of counterinsurgent violence; in fact, it was an intended effect.⁹⁰ There were two sides of the Salvadoran conflict that, according to Martín-Baró, were equally important to analyze: the pre- and the post-traumatic.⁹¹ For him, the effects he was witnessing as he wrote⁹², and those that certainly continued after his murder, were psychological components of social trauma. Counterinsurgent

⁸⁸ Ibid., 125.

⁸⁹ See Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁹⁰ Martín-Baró, 123.

⁹¹ Ibid., 123.

⁹² Ibid., 104. On November 16, 1989, Salvadoran U.S.-trained soldiers murdered Ignacio Martín-Baró, S.J.

war involved damaging an individual's sense of social self. This meant creating insecurity about one's "beliefs, judgment, and feelings, about right and wrong, and about what should or should not be done."⁹³ Such insecurity about all of the elements of engaged citizenship led to the next and only step that those in power allowed—that of accepting "official truths." These "truths" often conflicted with a person's common sense, but they offered an "immediate and tranquilizing response" to those who accepted them because acceptance brought with it a sense of security from additional violence.⁹⁴

Martín-Baró's work highlighted the value of publicizing and analyzing post-traumatic effects of violence. Of equal value, as he also showed, was glancing back to the pre-traumatic. The REMHI report oriented itself within the post-traumatic in that it sought to inscribe survivors' testimonies into historical summaries of the violence. At the same time, it took a long, hard look at the pre-traumatic by analyzing the mechanisms of horror. Credit for this blending of historicism and in-the-present-for-the-future approach to Guatemala's experience of civil war most certainly has to go to Monsignor Gerardi. As a member of the clergy serving his community under the principle of liberation theology. He undoubtedly had intimate awareness of Martín-Baró's work, which promoted a liberation *psychology*.⁹⁵ When he stepped into the

⁹³ Ibid., 139.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 139.

⁹⁵ This is best evinced by the inclusion of several of Martín-Baró's works in the REMHI report's bibliography.

directorship of ODHAG, this was the theological, political, and social context that he was an elemental part of.

Testimonios and the REMHI Project

The REMHI project began with an important set of questions. Each of these displayed a need to understand how humans could be capable of committing such horrific violence against each other.⁹⁶ REMHI organizers also wanted to know how things had devolved to a point where human life and dignity were so completely disregarded and, at worst, seen with contempt. In order to answer its guiding questions, the REMHI project decided to focus its energies on collecting testimonies. This would not be an easy task since it would conduct much of its fieldwork before the formal end of the conflict. According to REMHI organizers, “[el proyecto REMHI] tenía que enfrentarse a las presiones y amenazas contra la población que podía dar su testimonio.”⁹⁷ The REMHI, nevertheless, forged ahead despite this major obstacle.

The Office of Human Rights of the Archbishopric of Guatemala (ODHAG) handled the logistical side of the REMHI project. Beginning in April 1995, ODHAG organizers began a series of planning meetings.⁹⁸ The primary goals of these meetings were to elaborate a project model, identify central objectives, develop a methodology, and define the project’s guiding

⁹⁶ REMHI, vol. 1, xi.

⁹⁷ Ibid., xx.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

philosophy. For the project's organizers, REMHI would be a different type of truth commission.

In many ways the REMHI project did set itself apart from its Latin American predecessors. Unlike the Argentine commission, for example, REMHI sought to uncover the people's experience of violence. Organizers believed that strict reconstructions of events lacked a necessary component: victims' voices.⁹⁹ The REMHI project would have to forge a new path in order to recover the experiences of the people whose lives were affected by the conflict. One of the ways REMHI would do this was through survivor testimonies. These had to serve two simultaneous functions: that of testimony-as-pain and testimony-as-recovered dignity. On the one hand, testimonies necessarily rehashed the pain of a traumatic event. If all they did was focus on that pain, however, testimonies could do nothing more than re-victimize the victim.¹⁰⁰ To avoid this, testimonies had to represent for victims a way to recover a dignity they had been robbed of. Some of the REMHI project's organizers believed that gathering testimonies according to both conceptual functions would result in a collective historical memory project to be used as a tool for social reconstruction.¹⁰¹ By underscoring testimonies' multifaceted importance, the REMHI indeed followed a different path than did previous commissions.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xxii.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Having established REMHI's task of uncovering the truth, honoring the dead, and recovering people's experiences through testimony, ODHAG embarked on a three-month publicity campaign.¹⁰² Perhaps in response to the great unknown—the date a final peace settlement would be signed thereby marking the start of the CEH—the publicity campaign's motto was, "Ahora es el momento."¹⁰³ Organizers of the project raised awareness of its work through nationally broadcast radio and television advertisements. Given the REMHI project's ties to a sector of the Catholic Church, organizers placed flyers in churches throughout various departments.¹⁰⁴ Because the REMHI project centered its work on testimony, it was vital that the publicity campaign reach those whose memories of violence remained un-inscribed in the historical record.

REMHI organizers saw great value in constructing a historical narrative of the decades of violence and political repression, but of utmost importance to the project was returning to the people "...su derecho a la palabra."¹⁰⁵ Silencing individuals and entire communities was a tactic of counterinsurgent repression of civilian populations. For those who had to suffer in silence, REMHI's assertion the people's right to speak out was not new. A fragment

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, xxv.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, xxxi.

from one person's testimony describes the effects silence had on daily life and why speaking out was so necessary:

En nuestra comunidad todo está normal, como que no hubiera pasado nada, lo que pasa es que nuestras autoridades en ese entonces nos intimidaron y todos los desaparecimientos, secuestros y masacres no están declarados. Es por eso que quiero denunciarlo a nivel nacional e internacional y que salga a la claridad todo, como una historia que quede plasmada en un documento en donde relate todo lo pasado sobre el pueblo maya achí.¹⁰⁶

This person's desire to publicly denounce all that had gone unsaid is actually cultural. Anthropologist Victoria Sanford points out that "rural Maya have a strong community tradition of publicly speaking their objections and seeking redress within the local hierarchy."¹⁰⁷ So, the REMHI project's emphasis on recovering a collective, historical memory through testimony did not impose a foreign practice on Maya community. What REMHI did, in fact, was simply to take its cue from the communities it sought to empower.

The process of collecting testimonies was a collaborative effort. REMHI organizers relied on volunteers to collect and record the testimonies that would form the backbone of the REMHI report. These individuals were called *animadores*.¹⁰⁸ Large numbers of *animadores* came from the communities, so they were quite familiar with the individuals and groups who gave their testimonies. Also, many *animadores* had themselves witnessed or

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁰⁷ Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 42.

¹⁰⁸ REMHI, vol. 1, xxiii.

experienced violence and repression directly. In order to learn how to collect testimonies without inadvertently leading or limiting the speaker(s), *animadores* underwent a four- to six-month training where they learned, among other things, the history of the armed conflict, the effects of violence, and how to conduct interviews.¹⁰⁹ One key aspect of these interviews would be seven guiding questions designed to help the *animadores* navigate through such an emotionally taxing process.¹¹⁰

The motivations for becoming *animadores* and for completing the training process varied from person to person. Some *animadores* viewed their participation through the lens of Christianity, as the testimony of one *animador* suggests: “Si los Apóstoles no hubieran recuperado la historia de los evangelios, no existiría la Biblia. Así, nosotros estamos recuperando nuestra propia historia; somos testigos de cosas tristes, pero también que Dios veló por nosotros.”¹¹¹ Other individuals completed the training as a way to strengthen their community activism. In fact, the REMHI report states that out of 800 trainees, 200 participated as human rights, health, and education rights activists.¹¹² Though the impulse to participate varied, all trainees had in

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., xxiii.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. The questions were “¿Qué sucedió? ¿Cuándo y dónde? ¿Quiénes fueron los responsables? ¿Qué efectos—individuales, familiares, colectivos—tuvo ese hecho en su vida? ¿Qué hizo para enfrentarlo? ¿Por qué cree que pasó? ¿Qué habría que hacer para que no vuelva a suceder?”

¹¹¹ Ibid., xxv.

¹¹² Ibid., xxiv.

common the threat of army intimidation and repression.¹¹³ There was, nonetheless, a transformative power to the role. One massacre survivor, Juan Manuel Gerónimo, worked closely with REMHI and continued working for his community even after his work with REMHI ended.¹¹⁴ For him, REMHI represented a means through which he strengthened his leadership and advocacy skills. He believed that others could do the same:

I believe the work of REHMI [sic] needs to continue in the communities. The same people who worked in REHMI [sic] can collaborate with ECAP [a community healing project organized by Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial] to help the poor people who suffered these massacres talk about what happened and how it happened. This needs to be done and it needs to be done formally so that as our children and families grow, they will have clarity about our history and so there will be a space to continue to declare the truth.¹¹⁵

Thus, participation in the REMHI project was beneficial for the individual and for the community. Individuals found in the *animador* training a path toward more personal goals, as well as a new understanding of what they and their communities had experienced. The community, in turn, gained a cadre of persons prepared to forge a new path toward collective healing, community organizing, and continued peace work.

As many as were the reasons for becoming an *animador*, so were the reasons for offering one's testimony. Both individuals and groups gave their testimonies to REMHI collaborators. One reason was a strong desire to be

¹¹³ Ibid., xxv.

¹¹⁴ Sanford, 244.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

believed. As the REMHI report explains, this need to tell one's story and to have it be validated exposes the deeper value of testimony. Its inclusion in a report is symbolic of a less tangible process. As Davoine and Gaudillière, a violent event or experience that fails to enter the realm of the symbolic, that is, the realm of language external to the individual, remains a traumatic moment "...suspended like a present without time."¹¹⁶ Inscribing testimonies, including them in a formal report, validated the speaker, it accepted their testimony as one truth, and it acknowledged that this great injustice happened in a historical moment. For others, giving testimony was a step toward healing. For one declarant, the healing aspects of releasing painful memories was more than enough to make the process worth undertaking: "Qué rico hablar, yo creo que eso vale. Y creo que hablar es bueno y como no siempre podés hablar de eso, entonces parte de la recuperación de la memoria, por lo menos decirlo, platicar y saldar tu cuenta contigo misma."¹¹⁷

Conclusion

Through the sharing and collecting of testimonies, *animadores* and *declarantes* engaged in a testimonial process that brought them close together. Many of the *animadores* had lived similar tragedies. In many cases, they came directly from the village in which they collected testimonies. Their gaze upon

¹¹⁶ Françoise Davoine and Jean-Max Gaudillière, trans. by Susan Fairfield, *History Beyond Trauma: Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one cannot stay silent* (New York: Other Press, 2004), 44-52.

¹¹⁷ REHMI, vol. 1, 235.

the declarant, therefore, was not a distant one. They did not merely approach the testimonial process ethnographically. They approached it as cooperative partners in a process that was at once a mode of social healing and a contestation against impunity. The act of testimony incorporated declarants into an ongoing peace process. Declarants offered their explanations for why the violence had occurred and what they believed needed to be done in order to prevent it from happening again. By incorporating subjective interpretations into the objective process of constructing a history, REMHI offered an alternative to the type of interlocutor-subject relationship that proved to be so alienating for Menchú and Burgos.

REMHI began as a response to an agreement between the Guatemalan government and the URNG establishing the need for a truth commission. Organizers of the project believed that the limitations placed on the CEH in this agreement would stunt all that it could do to promote social healing and justice. By making the people's experience of violence, told through testimonies, the axis on which the entire project revolved, REMHI challenged the notion that only a truth about the country's violent past could exist. People's experiences, their historical memory, represented multiple truths that, in the telling, vindicated victims of violence and let them be active participants in the move toward peace and justice.

The next chapter will explore what happened with this part of the peace process once the government and URNG finally declared the formal end of the

36-yearlong conflict. The CEH would follow in the REMHI project's steps in the sense that it too distinguished itself in many ways from the truth commissions that came before it.

3

Declaring Peace and Establishing the CEH

In 1994, Guatemala was still two years away from a formal declaration that would end more than three decades of a bloody internal armed conflict. The government, which at that time was still synonymous with the military, had for years held mediated talks with the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG). Over the course of these peace talks, the two parties agreed that full historical disclosure had to be part of any ensuing peace. The *Acuerdo sobre el establecimiento de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico de las violaciones a los derechos humanos y los hechos de violencia que han causado sufrimientos a la población guatemalteca* (hereafter, Oslo Accord) established Guatemala's need for a truth commission and laid out that future commission's mandate under the premise of its necessity for ensuing peace.¹¹⁸ In the last 20 years, scholars have had much to say about the role and efficacy of truth commissions qua peace boosters. The criticism of these commissions in some cases is less-than-favorable, the Guatemalan version is no exception. For some, the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH)

¹¹⁸ "Acuerdo sobre el establecimiento de la Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico de las violaciones a los derechos humanos y los hechos de violencia que han causado sufrimientos a la población guatemalteca," January 10, 1994 <http://www.congreso.gob.gt/Docs/PAZ/Acuerdo%20sobre%20el%20establecimiento%20de%20la%20comision%20para%20el%20escl.pdf> (accessed April 21, 2010). Hereafter, Oslo Accord.

is just another nation-building project that paved the way for neoliberalism. For others, the commission and its report are much less problematic than the limited circulation of the CEH's findings. In many ways, the CEH breaks away from other truth commissions and evidence of this can be located in the way it interpreted its mandate. Much like the REMHI project, the CEH had a particular approach to its mandate and methodology. The REMHI project employed a methodology that, by design or effect, decreased the distance between interlocutor and subject. The CEH may have operated under many restrictions that prevented it from establishing a close connection between itself and its "subjects," but it did manage to stand out from previous Latin American truth commissions. In this chapter, I will outline the genesis of the CEH in order to locate the disjuncture between it and its predecessors.

Establishing the CEH: The Oslo Accord

On January 23, 1994, the Guatemalan military signed a pact with the URNG instituting the CEH. The preamble of the Oslo Accord positioned the truth commission as the last step of the negotiation process. According to the agreement, the country had suffered because of the armed conflict and Guatemalans had a right to know what happened in order to prevent history's repetition. The commission and its report would promote a "culture of harmony and respect" to counteract any desires of vengeance.¹¹⁹ Tall order for a

¹¹⁹ Ibid. The actual language acknowledges that there is a need for promoting a culture of peace: "...la necesidad de promover una cultura de concordancia y

commission that would have six short months, with the possibility of an additional six months should the need arise, to gather data, interpret it, and synthesize it into a report.¹²⁰

The Oslo Accord did not establish the start date for the CEH, but it did outline the specific objectives that the commission would meet and through which channels it would get its information. Since this agreement between the military and the URNG was the final step of the negotiation process, it was dependent on a final peace accord. The understanding was that as soon as the parties reached a peace settlement, the commission would begin its work. Just as the Oslo Accord did not establish a specific start date, it also failed to state explicitly the time frame under the CEH's purview: "El periodo que investigará la Comisión será a partir del inicio del enfrentamiento armado hasta que se suscriba el Acuerdo de Paz Firme y Duradera".¹²¹ One problem with such vague language is that the beginning of the conflict changes even in the recent historiography. This might have been a boon for the committee because it could determine for itself, without any bias and based on documented facts, the start date of the armed conflict. It remains unclear how much this inexact period under investigation had to do with differing views

respeto mutuo que elimine toda forma de revancha o venganza..." Its unclear to me what the degree of difference is between "revancha" or "venganza."

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

between the military and the URNG. The CEH, nonetheless, determined that the beginning of the conflict was January 1962.¹²²

Though the period the CEH would investigate or “esclarecer” remained unspecific, the commission’s main three objectives were clear.¹²³ First, the CEH would “objectively and impartially” present all human rights violations and violent episodes related to the conflict. It would also produce a report of its findings and offer “elementos objetivos de juicio,” taken to mean objective judgment. Finally, the commission would offer recommendations for continuing peace and democratization, including memorializing historical memory.¹²⁴ These seem fair, to be sure, but did they contradict themselves? In the first instance, the objectives emphasize and re-emphasize the need for objectivity and impartiality. In the second instance, however, it seems to say that the CEH will provide “objective judgment,” which seems like an oxymoron since judgment is by nature not objective. Furthermore, the “culture of respect” that the CEH would help foster seems rather apolitical. This, and the goal of memorializing victims, certainly makes it seem like the commission would be unable to make a structural impact. What would respect look like? Would it mean tolerating difference or engaging with opposing political viewpoints?

¹²² Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), *Guatemala, memoria del silencio* (Guatemala: CEH, 1998), vol. 1, 23-26.

¹²³ Oslo Accord.

¹²⁴ Oslo Accord, “...medidas para preservar la memoria de las víctimas, para fomentar una cultura de respeto mutuo y observancia de los derechos humanos....”

How would the CEH tackle the implication that memorializing victims carry?¹²⁵

The answers to these questions remained unclear, but one thing was for sure: the agreement between the Guatemalan state (i.e. the military) and the URNG clearly neutralized the CEH's potential for legal ramifications. Its report and recommendations would be non-binding: "Los trabajos, recomendaciones e informe de la Comisión no individualizarán responsabilidades, ni tendrán propósitos o efectos judiciales".¹²⁶ In light of these limitations, the CEH would have to figure out a way to tackle the thorny issues of historical memory, accountability, and fomenting peace, all the while knowing that its mandate denied it from having any legal or official power.

The Oslo Accord set up two final (dis)advantageous provisions for the CEH. The first was the source of the commission's information. According to the agreement, the CEH would get its information from sources ("personas o instituciones") that offered their "version of events."¹²⁷ Institutions, such as the military and the URNG, collaborated with the commission to varying degrees. According to the CEH, the military was, overall, uncooperative. In contrast, the URNG cooperated to a satisfactory degree, with a few exceptions.¹²⁸ Given this evaluation, it seems incredible that the government and the military

¹²⁵ "Memorializing" implies a degree of reification of victims as victims without political or ideological positions or motives. By freezing the "victims" in time, it would perhaps be easier for the state to gloss over the very real conflicts that played out over the course of 36 years.

¹²⁶ Oslo Accord.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ CEH, vol. I, 49-51.

rejected the CEH's findings as overly biased when they themselves did not readily offer their "version" of the conflict. The lack of cooperation from the government/military, coupled with the just satisfactory cooperation from the URNG, made it difficult for the CEH to gain access to classified documents, to conduct interviews with key figures, and to fact check. On a more positive note, such resistance to the CEH from one of the major actors in the conflict, underscored just how important it would be for the commission to gather testimonies and other documentary evidence from other sources.

The second provision that proved to be constricting was the established time limit imposed on the CEH's activities. Under the Oslo Accord, the commission would have six months to conduct its investigation and produce a final report of its findings and recommendations. Should it need additional time, it had the option of requesting an additional six months. This meant that the CEH would have, potentially, one year to examine over three decades of violence and create a summary of its work. Such an unrealistic time limit certainly helps to support historian Greg Grandin's claim that the Oslo Accord was nothing more than a gesture by the state to appease the URNG, since the army had already "won" the war. The CEH could not begin its work until the military and the URNG signed a final peace accord two years later on December 29, 1996. Therefore, for those with a stake in Guatemala's peace process (i.e. ODHAG), it remained unclear how the CEH would confront the term limit. Upon the signing of the peace accord, the CEH began its

organizational and planning work. By February 1997, the commissioners had been chosen. By May 1997, the CEH had obtained diplomatic immunity; it had held planning meetings to discuss logistics and financing¹²⁹; but it had not started collecting testimonies or going out into the field.¹³⁰ Finally, after seven months of planning, the CEH began its work on July 31, 1997, with 273 on-the-ground collaborators and participants, of which 142 were Guatemalans.¹³¹ The CEH's response to the magnitude of the project and the unrealistic time limit set forth by the Oslo Accord was thus: "La amplitud del mandato, particularmente el extenso período objeto de investigación, y la complejidad territorial y social en que la CEH debía trabajar motivaron que la Comisión decidiera utilizar la totalidad del tiempo máximo previsto de doce meses".¹³² In sum, the CEH spent twelve months gathering and analyzing data. It requested and received an additional six months to produce and publish its final report.

Getting to work: From the Oslo Accord to the grassroots

The CEH had a conceptualization of its work that was both rooted in its formal mandate and was part of a larger human rights framework. Its goal was not simply to write a history of the conflict itself. Rather, it was really to expose human rights violations and violence vis-à-vis the conflict. The CEH, therefore,

¹²⁹ CEH, vol. I, 30. The governments of Guatemala, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, the United States, Italy, Japan, Norway, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Switzerland, Sweden, and the European Union provided funding for the commission.

¹³⁰ CEH, vol. I, 27.

¹³¹ CEH, vol. I, 31.

¹³² CEH, vol. I, 41.

discusses the “enfrentamiento armado” in its report, but only as a way to set the context for the violence.¹³³ Perhaps more important than outlining the major events of and individuals involved in the conflict were the answers to the CEH’s guiding questions:

“Por qué un sector de la población recurrió a la violencia armada para alcanzar el poder político? ¿Qué explica los actos de violencia desmedida, de diverso signo e intensidad, cometidos por ambas partes en el enfrentamiento armado? ¿Por qué la violencia, especialmente la proveniente del Estado, afectó a la población civil, en particular al pueblo maya, cuyas mujeres fueron consideradas como botín de Guerra y soportaron todo el rigor de la violencia organizada? ¿Por qué la niñez indefensa sufrió los actos de salvajismo? ¿Por que en nombre de Dios se pretendió exterminar de la faz de la tierra a los hijos e hijas de Xmukane’, la abuela de la vida y de la creación natural? ¿Por qué esos actos, de barbarie ultrajante, no respetaron las reglas más elementales del derecho humanitario, la ética Cristiana y los valores de la espiritualidad maya?”¹³⁴

These questions flow out of two impulses. On the one hand, is a basic need to identify a rationale or a process that might explain what makes humans capable of committing the worst crimes. In this respect, the CEH reveals its guiding principal, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which informed the legal justification for the CEH’s answers to these questions.¹³⁵

On the other hand, is a particular way of tracing structural conditions that allow for certain kinds of political maneuvering, which in the Guatemalan case

¹³³ CEH, vol. I, 43.

¹³⁴ CEH, vol. I, 15-16.

¹³⁵ CEH, vol. I, 45. “El parámetro fundamental del marco jurídico de toda la actuación de la Comisión es la Declaración Universal de los Derechos Humanos....”

resulted in extreme forms of violence to maintain the status quo of political and social stratification. Its mandate bound the commission to shed light on violations linked to the conflict with utmost impartiality. The commission employed the discourse of universal human rights. And, it found a way to avoid falling into the trap of presenting the violence as a moment of regression to a primal state of being where violence was par for the course or as just another parable for why the UDHR should be adopted everywhere.

The CEH defined the crimes under investigation in a way that implicitly acknowledged that the conflict made possible many crimes, and many of the crimes were in fact desired results of clearly defined strategies developed by both sides. One category of crimes was violations against the human rights of the Guatemalan population. These included all those acts committed by the state or paramilitary groups: “...actos perpetrados por agentes del Estado o cuando, con su conocimiento o aquiescencia, lo ejecutan particulares”.¹³⁶ Agents of the state can be taken to mean military forces, while “particulares” refer to death squads, civil defense groups associated with the military, and the like. A second category of crimes is “hechos de violencia”, or acts of violence. These include all those committed by the URNG, as well as those by private citizens. The key difference between these private citizens who commit acts of violence and those who commit human rights violations as defined above is that the former committed crimes for personal gain. These crimes,

¹³⁶ CEH, vol. I, 47.

moreover, lacked the government's support.¹³⁷ The CEH would investigate crimes falling under either or both of these categories with the understanding that its function was not judicial; rather, it was to edify Guatemalans so that they would come to know their recent history. To this end, the CEH would not (and does not) name names in its coverage of massacres or violent acts. It did find a way to work around this constraint imposed on it by the Oslo Accord, if only in position statements rather than actions.

Spreading the Word: The CEH's Outreach and Public Relations Campaign

One of the primary critiques of the Guatemalan government and conservatives alike was the CEH was biased and that its report did not present a fair version or analysis of events. The accusation of extreme bias rings untrue when one looks at just how much effort the Commission made to reach out to a wide audience. The commission relied on a variety of sources for its information. For instance, it identified five types of sources: personal stories, documentary evidence, official entities like the Guatemalan government and the URNG, other governments, and the press.¹³⁸ The commission evaluated each source according to how useful the information would be to the report

¹³⁷ Ibid. "...hechos cometidos por integrantes de la URNG [y]...cometidos por personas privadas, aprovechando o abusando de la situación prevaleciente debido al enfrentamiento armado, con la finalidad de defender o favorecer sus intereses individuales, realizados sin la colaboración, consentimiento, aquiescencia o tolerancia del Estado".

¹³⁸ CEH, vol. I, 53-58.

and to which particular aspect of it. In order to reach its target sources, the CEH embarked upon an outreach and public relations campaign.

Because Guatemala was still a predominantly rural, agrarian country, and because the long conflict significantly restricted the development and maintenance of communication and transportation infrastructures, the CEH deployed a wide-reaching campaign to spread word of its work. Among the first steps it took was the installation of support offices (“Oficinas de apoyo”) throughout the country.¹³⁹ These offices served as open-access spaces where individuals could offer their testimonies to representatives of the commission. In addition to the broader community, the CEH also reached out directly to local leaders, formal and traditional, as well as through a public awareness campaign. Through the press and the radio, the CEH informed all Guatemalans of its presence, its work, and its purpose.¹⁴⁰ In sum, the commission placed fourteen different advertisements in dailies, magazines, newspapers, and at least one Central American regional magazine. It also broadcast radio advertisements and episodic programs in Spanish and in nine Maya languages.¹⁴¹ Without a doubt, the CEH purposely cast a wide net to raise awareness of its presence and its task in order to meet the impartiality

¹³⁹ CEH, vol. I, 32. The central offices of the commission were located in the capital, but it set up as many satellite offices as possible to reach rural communities. Satellite offices were, however, opened predominantly in the western region of the country.

¹⁴⁰ CEH, vol. I, 33.

¹⁴¹ CEH, vol. I, 35.

requirement set forth in the Oslo Accord. Whether or not all sectors of the population, with or without a particular political stake in the history of the conflict that would be produced, participated or not, was out of the commission's hands.

Testimonios and the CEH: Gathering, verify, and paring off

One of the primary sources of information the CEH privileged in both its information-gathering period and in its report were the testimonios of thousands of Guatemalans. As important as these oral histories were to the CEH's process of investigation, the commission did not simply take testifiers by their word. Each testimonio underwent a rigorous verification process, the results of which determined what role certain testimonios would play in the final report. The different grades of testimonios, determined by this verification process, in turn led to a hierarchization of witnesses that makes problematic the relationship between interlocutor and testimonial subject.

The CEH identified testimonies as key to its investigation. Testimonies would become for the commission qualitative and quantitative sources of information for its report. According to it, these functions of testimonies helped the commission analyze, in general terms, the broad categories of analysis contained in *Memoria del silencio*.¹⁴² Since the great majority of individuals living in affected areas targeted by the CEH spoke a language other than Spanish, namely a Maya language, the commission employed translators and

¹⁴² CEH, vol. I, 53.

interpreters. In doing so, the commission made it easier for indigenous peasants (“campesinos indígenas) to give their testimonios. It is unclear, however, what the actual testimonial setting was: were there three persons involved—CEH representative, translator, and testimonial subject or just two—translator/interpreter hired by the CEH and testimonial subject? Given all the CEH did to establish the importance of testimonies and to facilitate the process by, for example, hiring translators and interpreters, one would think that all testimonies had equal footing in the process. The CEH relied heavily on testimony, but not all were equal—and that includes testimonial subjects.

The commission established certain parameters that valued witnesses and their testimonies along varying degrees. In keeping with the Oslo Accord’s stipulation of impartiality, the CEH determined that it was imperative to establish a process of verification to determine the credibility of the source (the testimonial subject) and the information (the testimonio). Depending on how verifiable and reliable the source, the commission would include it in its final analysis.¹⁴³ Such a process of verification included many levels of fact checking, not the least of which was that of the testimonial subject him/herself. Even before the commission would consider a case, the person giving testimony had to provide corroborating evidence. If the person was unable to, the field staff made efforts to obtain it. If the field staff failed to find supporting information that could prove the truth of the matter or to connect it to the

¹⁴³ CEH, vol. I, 59.

conflict/period of investigation or the parties, then the commission could only use the testimony as background information.¹⁴⁴ For all testimonies, fully verified or not, investigators had to include a disclaimer for all uncorroborated elements. Moreover, those witnesses who offered intimate and verifiable details of abuses or the activities of the military or URNG, the CEH would label them as “testigos clave”.¹⁴⁵ What this process of verification vis-à-vis testimony and gradation of witnesses exposes are the multiple layers or degrees of separation in the testimony giving and gathering process. The witness offered a testimony to a field investigator. This investigator fact-checked. A regional office would then receive the testimony, with verified ones being privileged over the unverified that in final estimation were downgraded to background information. Readers of *Guatemala nunca más* ultimately receive at least a third-party rendering of the testimony. Because of this “watering down” of testimonio, and for many other reasons that we shall see, contemporary scholars of Guatemala have criticized the CEH and its report.

Analyzing the CEH: A tool for healing and justice or a path toward neoliberalism?

Scholars have criticized truth and reconciliation commissions for helping to usher neoliberalism into Latin America. They have also faulted commissions and their reports for presenting a de-politicized historical memory

¹⁴⁴ CEH, vol. I, 60.

¹⁴⁵ CEH, vol. I, 54-61.

that disassociates trauma, violence, and victimization from hard-fought political and ideological struggles. In many ways, the CEH and its report play into these criticisms. In comparison to its predecessors, however, the CEH set itself apart as a truth commission for the way it stepped beyond a juridical vision of its work and turned to historical analysis to reinsert violence into a broader causal genealogy.

Change over time in the conceptualization of democracy is one factor scholars cite as evidence of a shift toward neoliberalism. Democracy in the period between 1950 and 1980 could be seen as "...a commitment to popular, more particularly working-class participation in politics, and social and economic improvements for the poorer sections of the population."¹⁴⁶ By 1980, this definition of democracy had changed to "...focus more precisely on political and legal rights rather than on social ones."¹⁴⁷ The Argentine case exemplifies this most clearly in the way that the state and the commission privileged the courtroom as the arena where democratic reconciliation would occur. Through judicial proceedings, violations of individual rights stood over and above collective struggles. CONADEP, the Argentine truth commission failed to situate the country's violence, and the path away from it, within a

¹⁴⁶ Greg Grandin, "The Instruction of Great Catastrophe: Truth Commissions, National History and State Formation in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala," *The American Historical Review* 110, no. 1 (February 2005), <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/110.1/grandin.html> (accessed November 16, 2009), 1.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

broader history of competing powers and interests; rather, it presented the dirty war as a series of individual, disjointed legal violations of individual rights.¹⁴⁸ Such a reorientation of the notion of democracy away from the collective and toward the individual was necessary if once-violent states were to successfully enter a period of “*pax neoliberal*.”¹⁴⁹ This type of peace neatly packages the history of violence into a “creation myth” that glosses over the individual and collective aspects of conflicts over rights and justice.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, according to Grandin and Klubock, it is “...essential to the implementation of market reforms according to hegemonic neoliberal economic development theory.”¹⁵¹ Herein lies the inherent contradiction of truth commissions: they raise the hope of a new way of life (political, social, cultural) even though they are limited in scope.¹⁵² Truth commissions are billed, not as “instruments of justice,” but as “bridges” between the violent past and the peaceful (and maybe) democratic future—what you were and what you hope to be. The problem for Guatemala is that it still *is*, yet it nonetheless has been thrust into Central America’s period of this so-called “*pax neoliberal*”.

Academics and human rights workers have criticized truth commissions, in general, and the CEH in particular for presenting depoliticized

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ Greg Grandin and Thomas Miller Klubock, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Radical History Review* 97 (Winter 2007), 1.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵² Grandin, “The Instruction of Great Catastrophe,” 1.

versions of historical memory. For Elizabeth Oglesby, the CEH's report represents a "contemporary neoliberal bargain":

...the horrors of the counterinsurgency war are revealed and the barbarism of the past is offered up as the very opposite of the current order....State violence is recognized, but ultimately reified, as its targets are drained of their identities as historical protagonists. In that sense, recognizing the state's atrocities may be less threatening to middle class and elite sensibilities in Guatemala than coming to grips with the histories of wide-spread indigenous mobilization. International agencies did not create this depoliticization of historical memory, but under the banner of projects to disseminate the CEH report, they are emerging as key brokers in sustaining it.¹⁵³

This brings up three key points. First, certain social sectors prefer to see historical memory as a history of violence that creates victims rather than as the history of collective political struggle. These apolitical victims, furthermore, are more palatable for Guatemala's elite and middle class who perhaps harbor racist sentiments for the Maya, or who have a stake in the type of post-war peace Guatemala is to have and in the way its violent past is remembered. Finally, though the CEH did engage with the social and political conditions existing before and during the conflict, it could not control how its report would be read and disseminated, nor by whom. Organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), for instance, have taken on the task of publicizing the CEH's report through

¹⁵³ Elizabeth Oglesby, "Educating Citizens in Postwar Guatemala: Historical Memory, Genocide, and the Culture of Peace," *Radical History Review* 97 (Winter 2007), 92.

pedagogical materials. One of the shortcomings of UNESCO's effort, however, has been that in parsing out only certain portions of the report for distribution, it has nurtured a binary version of Guatemala's history. The culture of violence-culture of peace binary conveniently avoids an actual "memory of *politics*."¹⁵⁴ It is at this point that Oglesby and Grandin concur insofar as truth commissions demarcate the end of a violent period and the beginning of a peaceful one as if the conditions that made extreme violence possible cease to exist with the establishment of peace.

For all of the faults the CEH may share with its predecessors—namely the truth commissions of Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile—it stands out for many reasons when compared to those other truth commissions, chiefly, in its response to the Oslo Accord. According to historian Greg Grandin, the goal of truth commissions in Bolivia (1982) and Argentina (1983) was prosecution, which effectively separated the state from its role as arbiter of social rights.¹⁵⁵ Lawyers primarily ran these early truth commissions and kept history at bay. Their interpretation of history was not as cause or process, but as a "breakdown" of society. As such, these commissions produced reports in which history played the role of parable detailing what the state could become if "we" fail to implement certain economic reforms or liberal policies, for instance. The CEH, in contrast, moved away from a strictly juridical approach

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵⁵ Grandin, "The Instruction of Great Catastrophe," 2.

and did not employ a strictly “legal investigative methodology” to carry out its work.¹⁵⁶ As a result, it did take on the task of analyzing in its report the social and economic conditions leading up to and fueling the conflict. In effect, the CEH was not juridical in aims or method, primarily because of its restrictive mandate, but it did confront the historical processes that made it possible for Guatemala’s conflict to play out as it did. Further, unlike in Argentina where the state was the petitioner request legal redress for crimes committed during the Dirty War, the CEH set out to provide all the necessary documentation for private citizens to sue perpetrators of Guatemala’s armed conflict. The CEH made this explicit in its report:

Si bien el Acuerdo dice que ni los trabajos ni el Informe tienen efectos judiciales, nada obsta que la institucionalidad del Estado, particularmente las entidades del sistema de administración de justicia, puedan basarse en elementos contenidos en el Informe de la CEH. Este mismo razonamiento es aplicable a los ciudadanos, que mantienen su pleno derecho a ejercer las acciones que, en relación con casos descritos en este Informe, les pueda corresponder en su calidad de víctimas o de familiares de las mismas.¹⁵⁷

Private citizens and courts alike have begun relying on the CEH’s report for contextual evidence in judicial proceedings.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Greg Grandin, “Chronicles of a Guatemalan Genocide Foretold: Violence, Trauma, and the Limits of Historical Inquiry,” *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1, no. 2 (2000), 392.

¹⁵⁷ CEH, vol. I, 44.

¹⁵⁸ See Amanda Kistler, “Disappeared but Not Forgotten: A Guatemalan Community Achieves a Landmark Verdict,” *NACLA: Report on the Americas* 43, no. 1 (January/February 2010), 9-13.

Conclusion

The CEH offered victims and their families the tools with which to seek justice for their suffering. Despite the limitations placed on it, the commission did not simply follow the example of other truth commissions. It did not focus solely on legal interpretations of the violence as did the Rettig Commission. Instead, it incorporated a sociohistorical approach to the "clarification" of a long and contentious conflict. Unlike the REMHI report, however, the CEH did not emphasize as heavily the importance of testimony to the project. Survivors' accounts were vital, of course, but in a different way. For REMHI, testimonies had been proof enough of the horrific acts of violence committed in the name of a counterinsurgent war. For the CEH, testimonies served as signposts for the CEH investigations. The CEH received a testimony and put it through a rigorous verification process in which it conducted its own field work to determine how verifiable and quantifiable was the information contained in the testimony. Each approach had a different effect. The next, and final, chapter stands each report side by side in an attempt to paint a clearer picture of the way each report incorporated testimonies into a broader historical narrative.

4

Two Approaches to Gender Violence and Rape Testimonies

As challenging and complicated as the planning and organizing process was for both the REMHI and the CEH, the next major challenge was the creation of the actual report of their findings and conclusions. This chapter contains a comparative analysis of the actual layout of each report. It also explores qualitative differences and similarities in the coverage of gender violence contained in each report. On the one hand, REMHI's focus on the individual and community effects of gender violence during the war supports one of its guiding principles, which is to honor the victims of the conflict by acknowledging their suffering and by empowering survivors to speak about their experiences.¹⁵⁹ The CEH's coverage of gender violence, on the other hand, supports its position on the applied usefulness of the commission's work—just as the Guatemalan justice system can use the information contained in the report as a foundation for its work, so to can private citizens *qua* victims or family members of victims seeking restitution.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ REMHI, vol. 1, xi.

¹⁶⁰ CEH, vol. 1, 44.

Guatemala, memoria del silencio: Twelve volumes of horror and hope

In twelve volumes, the CEH presents its mandate, its findings, and its conclusions and recommendations. Two parts make up the first volume, titled “Mandato y procedimiento—Causas y orígenes del enfrentamiento armado interno”. First, the CEH explains its genesis focusing on the political process and its methodology. The bulk of the volume details Guatemala’s sociopolitical history from 1944 to 1996. It identifies three primary historical causes of the armed conflict: agrarian and economic inequality, racism, and authoritarianism. As Elizabeth Oglesby notes, before the peace accords, Guatemala’s school curriculum for primary and secondary schools did not include the country’s history, at least not from a critical perspective.¹⁶¹ The effect, intended or not, of this historicization of the conflict is that it challenges the ideas of counterinsurgency projects that either identified violence as a momentary, extraordinary occurrence or as the instigations of external influences.¹⁶² In Guatemala, the army used the Cold War trope of the communist threat to explain away the internal, organic causes of the conflict. By tracing over 50 years of the country’s history from a critical perspective, the CEH dispels the myths of anomie and “the red scare” while simultaneously returning to Guatemalans another version of their own history.

¹⁶¹ Oglesby, 84.

¹⁶² See Grandin, “The Instruction of Great Catastrophe.” The author points out that in Argentina, truth commission jurists identified violence as a breakdown in social relations, whereas in Chile, it was seen as the consequence of “forces beyond Chile’s borders....”

The next volume, “Las violaciones de los derechos humanos y los hechos de violencia” examines the strategies deployed by the military as part of its counterinsurgency campaign, as well as those employed by the guerrilla. This is where readers first encounter witness testimonies. One thing to note is that some of these “testimonies” are actually direct quotations from military propaganda material and official documents. Many other testimonies included in the volume are direct accounts by former military personnel. The bulk of the volume explores in detail all of the different elements of the military’s strategy, such as “scorched earth”, special forces training, and intelligence gathering. In terms of guerrilla strategy, the volume discusses the development of various groups that eventually united under the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG). Apropos of guerrilla culpability for human rights violations, the CEH clearly states that guerrilla forces also committed grave crimes against the civilian population. These included endangering the lives, liberty, and livelihood of non-combatants: “La insurgencia realizó actos que ocasionaron la pérdida de vidas, que vulneraron la integridad física y la libertad, que involucraron a civiles en el enfrentamiento, que atentaron contra el patrimonio estatal y particular, entre otros”.¹⁶³

This volume contains testimonial fragments that serve as supporting evidence for material presented under each subheading. For instance, in its discussion of the guerrillas consciousness-raising work among various

¹⁶³ CEH, vol. 2, 237.

communities, the report explains that some people joined the guerrilla for ideological reasons that offered them an alternate way of confronting their lived experiences; others were coerced by active guerrilla members, their family, or community.¹⁶⁴ A testimonial fragment provided by an ex-commander of the FAR offers one person's motives for joining the guerrilla: "A esa edad uno no tiene conciencia, pero sí siente simpatía por el trabajo de la organización. Me fui involucrando al convertirme en guía de los compañeros, los guiaba a los lugares que ellos necesitaban llegar y les presentaba a nueva gente....".¹⁶⁵ One can infer that this person was quite young when he first came in contact with the guerrilla. He points out that political consciousness is hard to come by in one's youth, but presumably because of the real conditions he saw around him, in his community, he was sympathetic to the guerrilla cause. In addition, he gives a clue as to how the guerrilla was able to spread its message—through affective relationships among community members. To whatever degree there was (or might have been) external forces at play in Guatemala's conflict, testimonial fragments such as this one reveal the organic processes occurring throughout the areas of conflict. Supporting the CEH's findings in this way is the major role of testimonial fragments in volume two.

A continuation of the previous volume, "Las violaciones de los derechos humanos y los hechos de violencia" also lists various types of violations, such

¹⁶⁴ CEH, vol. 2, 250.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

as violence against women, violence directed at children, arbitrary executions, and violations against individual and indigenous rights to life, integrity and identity. As in the preceding volume, the different types of violence fall under two main categories: human rights violations (those committed by the Guatemalan army/state) and acts of violence (those committed by the guerrilla forces). This volume also employs testimonial fragments as supporting evidence for the commission's findings. When describing torture tactics, for instance, the report explains that part of the army's method of instilling fear in the general population was through torture. While torture sessions were often conducted in private, public torture was also used for its instructive power. These public displays succeeded in teaching two things: first, they showed people exactly what the military was capable of, and second, as a tactic of terror, it devalued the (social) body and reiterated the subjugation of the collective by forcing the community to "clean up" after the army. The CEH provides the following as an example of this: "Le cortaron sus orejas, su lengua, dejaron su cuerpo tirado y los vecinos lo enterraron".¹⁶⁶ The disdain for the dignity of human life and the terror employed in the military's counterinsurgency campaign is palpable in this testimonial fragment, as it is in the many others like it contained in this volume.

In volume four, "Consecuencias y efectos de la violencia", the CEH presents the consequences and effects of the 36-year conflict. Major themes

¹⁶⁶ CEH, vol. 3, 70.

of this volume include the weakening of the state, rupture of the social fabric, economic effects, and efforts made to confront and/or counteract the violence. While each volume contains an appendix, which includes tables, graphs, and other relevant documents—all of which are important—two documents in this one are notable. One is an army propaganda flyer circulated during the conflict. Its audience was the refugee and displaced community and reads: “Guatemalan: Denounce them! If you want peace, if you respect the law, if you love your family.”¹⁶⁷ Two crudely drawn figures stand in opposition to each other. On the left is a woman, easily identifiable as Maya because of her braided hair, her huipil (part of the traditional Maya style of dress), corte, and sandals. She points an accusatory finger at the figure on the right: an anthropomorphic monster. This grotesque, hairy figure has the face of a devil, claws, shredded clothing, a machine gun strapped to its back, and a grenade hooked onto its belt. On its forehead is etched URNG, on its left hand, FAR, and on its right, PGT.¹⁶⁸ Emblazoned on its torn shirt is a hammer and sickle (a Communist icon), and written on each pant leg is ORPA and EGP. The figure is also wearing rubber boots, part of the typical outfit of a Guatemalan *campesino*. Encased in a large arrow stemming from the woman’s accusatory pointed finger directed at the monstrous figure is the word “¡Denúncialos!”.

¹⁶⁷ CEH, vol. 4, 258.

¹⁶⁸ All of the following were guerrilla groups considered enemies of state: Unidad Revolucionaria Nacionalal Guatemalteca (URNG), Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), Partido Guatemalteco de los Trabajadores (PGT), Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP), Organización del Pueblo en Armas (ORPA).

The other notable document included in the appendix is a handwritten, itemized list of one declarant's losses during an army raid.¹⁶⁹ Some of the materials listed include 72 goats (valued at Q500), 70 chickens (valued at Q700), and a cow (valued at Q700). The losses total Q7, 895—a significant sum for a peasant at any point in Guatemala's recent history given the economic straits that have plagued the country.

Volume five contains the CEH's conclusions and recommendations. According to the report, the conclusions—based on the commission's investigations, the testimonies it received, materials obtained from the state and the guerrilla, and other secondary materials—fall into three main categories. The first category covers the CEH's general remarks. For example, the CEH finds that economic, cultural, and social relations have been inherently unequal and divisive.¹⁷⁰ In addition, the inability of the state to adequately respond to citizens' demands resulted in its own incapacitation. The military took advantage of the weak government and implemented its own system of "justice" and methods of social control.¹⁷¹ The second category focuses on violations of human rights and acts of violence. The commission asserts, for instance, that disappearances were part of military intelligence tactics designed to destroy political collectives and plant seeds of terror in the

¹⁶⁹ CEH, vol. 4, 257.

¹⁷⁰ CEH, vol. 5, 21.

¹⁷¹ CEH, vol. 5, 23.

broader population.¹⁷² Furthermore, the CEH identifies rape as a regular army tactic used during torture sessions or just before killing the victim.¹⁷³ Rape was a tactic of war, not a momentary aberration in the behavior of soldiers and civil defense patrollers. Its desired effect was the complete violation, symbolic and physical, of both the individual and collective body. Finally, the third category concludes on the peace process, generally. The CEH acknowledges the remarkable efforts that went into a formal declaration of peace. It also recognizes that the peace process will be a long one given that it requires, among many things, demilitarization and a strengthening of the justice system.¹⁷⁴ In effect, this last statement accurately reflects the last 15 years since the formal declaration of peace.

The CEH's recommendations targeted three important areas: honoring the memory of victims, fomenting respect for human rights, and strengthening the ongoing peace process.¹⁷⁵ Regarding the first main point, the president must acknowledge the country's violent past and ask survivors and family members of victims for forgiveness. This will restore the dignity of the victims.¹⁷⁶ The government should also commemorate the memory of the victims by, at the very least, declaring a national day of remembrance.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² CEH, vol. 5, 44.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ CEH, vol. 5, 56.

¹⁷⁵ CEH, vol. 5, 20.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 61.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 61.

Doing so could have positive effects, symbolically, for it will serve as a reminder to all the nation to pause and reflect on the tragedy of war. In order to drive the peace process forward, the government should also establish a national reparations program. What this would look like remains unclear, but the recommendation reflects a demand of several human rights organizations operating within the country, primarily that of the National Coordinator of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA).¹⁷⁸ Not only should the government care for survivors and families of victims, it should work with relevant agencies to investigate disappearances to determine the whereabouts of the missing.¹⁷⁹ Finally, as a way of inculcating a respect for human rights among the country's citizenry, the state should adopt the recommendations of the commission and collaborate with human rights and indigenous grassroots organizations to disseminate the report. The collaboration of the state and these organizations would have as its goal an educational campaign to promote human rights, democracy, and tolerance.¹⁸⁰ These are but a few of the many recommendations the CEH makes in its concluding remarks.

The last few volumes of the report serve an interesting purpose: they contain specific cases that the CEH investigated thoroughly and deemed verifiable. Volume six and seven, "Casos ilustrativos, Anexo I", contain illustrative cases based on individual and collective testimonies of direct

¹⁷⁸ See http://www.conavigua.org.gt/index_acerca.htm

¹⁷⁹ CEH, vol. 5, 65.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

witnesses to massacres, kidnappings, torture, executions, and sexual violence. Each case follows a standard rubric: historical background, description of the event(s), the aftermath, the CEH's conclusions, and a listing of the victims. The next four volumes, "Casos presentados, Anexo II", compile 7,413 cases of human rights violations and acts of violence. The CEH rigorously investigated each of these cases by collecting the testimonies of direct victims and eyewitnesses. In cases involving massacres, the CEH also participated in the exhumations of mass graves as a way of finding corroborating physical evidence. Though the testimonies behind the case summaries are those of "key witnesses", the CEH could not include the full testimonies in the appendix because of space limitations. The fragments found throughout the report, however, come from these testimonies. Ironically, through the investigation of each of the cases, the CEH did uncover the identities of the material and intellectual authors of the crimes, but because of the restrictions of the Oslo Accord, it could only assign institutional blame.¹⁸¹ The twelfth and final volume of the report, simply titled "Anexo III", contains legal documents, such as the Oslo Accord, that paved the way for the establishment of the CEH. It also contains a compilation of correspondence between the CEH and different Guatemalan institutions like the Ministry of Defense and the Executive Office. Finally, it contains a listing of governmental and non-governmental

¹⁸¹ CEH, vol. 8, 17.

collaborators, as well as basic statistical information based on the CEH's investigations.

Guatemala, nunca más: Tragedies and Strategies of War in Four Volumes

The REMHI project culminated in a formal four-volume report that was published in 1998. The first volume of the report, titled "Impactos de la violencia", outlines the value of testimony and gives a survey of sociopolitical violence in Guatemala. The chapters are divided along eight themes: individual consequences of the violence, consequences for the family ("consecuencias familiares de la violencia"), the destruction of the seed (i.e. children), aggression directed at the community, confronting the consequences of the violence, confronting pain and moving from violence to an affirmation of women, in search of an explanation, and finally, prevention so that this never occurs again. Beginning with the first chapter, this volume contains testimonial fragments that range from one or two sentences to half-page excerpts.

All of the major sections in this volume show the REMHI project's concern for personal and collective effects of the violence. One of the largest sections, for instance, discusses the emotional effects of a political and legal sense of injustice. For many, the murder of their family members coupled with the destruction of their homes left them wondering who would help them. This

feeling of alienation, of feeling as if there is no recourse to protection or to recovery, is palpable in one person's testimony:

“Quemaron nuestras casas, comieron nuestros animales, mataron nuestros niños, las mujeres, los hombres, ¡ay!, ¡ay!. ¿Quién va a reponer todas las casas? El Ejército no lo va a hacer”.¹⁸²

For this person, the military's function inverted completely; if at one point, the army's task was to protect its citizens, in this case, it became the very source of destruction. Another example in this volume of REMHI's concern with personal, psychosocial consequences of trauma is the numerous testimonies describing psychosomatic manifestations of fear and grief.¹⁸³ For many survivors, the traumas caused by witnessing or experiencing extreme violence manifested physically and emotionally. One woman describes her grief over the 1982 execution of her husband this way

Yo me siento muy enferma y triste porque cuando uno se acuerda de todo eso que le ha pasado, nos ofende mucho, nos molesta porque nos ponemos tristes, sin familiares, ¿a causa de qué? A causa del ejército. Y nos quedamos aquí porque no tenemos tierra, sin comida.¹⁸⁴

For this survivor, the reliving of traumatic moment(s) causes physical responses akin to ill health. Her inability to understand why these things happened to her and to her family compounds the sense of hopelessness that her circumstances—of landlessness and hunger—intensify.

¹⁸² REMHI, vol. 1, 41.

¹⁸³ REMHI, vol. 1, xxxi.

¹⁸⁴ REMHI, vol. 1, 46.

Volume two, “Los mecanismos del horror”, explores the method behind the horrifying violence deployed on Guatemalans, especially the Maya. Military intelligence developed a strategy that targeted civilians ostensibly to get to the guerrilla. For the armed forces, counterinsurgency was not simply a matter of skirmishing with the guerrilla. It was also about attacking all sources of support for the “insurgency.” According to a training manual, successful counterinsurgency involved a new tactics of war:

El destruir esas fuerzas armadas no será entonces un objetivo en sí mismo, sino que será un medio para reconquistar el control de la población. Esta destrucción es difícil de lograr sólo por la batalla. Es necesario ahogarles y reducirlas a su condición de guerrillas, ocupando por la fuerza las zonas o lugares de donde ellas pueden obtener sus recursos humanos y materiales.¹⁸⁵

The army carried out massacres, occupied villages, razed entire communities and established military-run “model villages.” It also incorporated the community itself in its own destruction. One method of doing this was to take young children and train them in techniques of surveillance targeted at their own families and neighbors.¹⁸⁶ This volume is particularly useful for its coverage of military tactics such as those mentioned above, as well as for its careful breakdown of the Guatemalan military complex.

Volume three, titled *El entorno histórico*, provides a historical overview focused on the sociopolitical antecedents of the armed internal conflict. It

¹⁸⁵ REMHI, vol. 2, 113. Taken from the Guatemalan army’s 1983 Counterinsurgency Manual.

¹⁸⁶ REMHI, vol. 2, 127. “Nuestros hijos apenas tenían 10 años de edad y fueron obligados a hacer patrullas en la comunidad”.

begins with a very brief discussion of the 1870s political and economic environment and segues into a survey of the 1950s. The focus is placed squarely on the land struggles of the period in an effort to show how and why peasants, particularly rural Maya, became one focus of the militarized state. The narrative takes readers through a presentation of the armed conflict in the 1960s, the military governments of the 1970s, and the military governments of Efraín Ríos Montt and Oscar Humberto Mejía Víctores. The second half of the text covers the transitional phase marked by a move toward civilian governance beginning with the presidency of Vinicio Cerezo in the late 1980s and taken up by the presidency of Jorge Serrano Elías in 1990. The last section of the book takes a look at the preparation for the formal end of the conflict: *preparando la posguerra*.

The final volume of the REMHI report, titled “Victimas del conflicto”, contains an extensive listing of the dead and the missing. For each victim, the report identifies whether they were assassinated, disappeared, or tortured. The list of victims also contains all available identifying information, such as date of birth, ethnicity, and location of the crime. Another important aspect of this volume is that it holds the REMHI project’s conclusions and recommendations of its work and of its findings.

Two Approaches to Violence against Women: Comparing the CEH and the REMHI

The reports of the REMHI project and the CEH make unique contributions to the historiography of Guatemala's internal armed conflict. The reports explore many of the same topics albeit from different methodological positions. From the REMHI's inception, its organizers imagined that it would complement the CEH's work and it did. In simple terms, it prepared the path for the CEH by raising awareness about the need to dignify the memory of victims through testimony. REMHI organizers believed that this project would have easier access to affected communities, while the CEH would serve a more official function, although it was unclear back in 1994, what this would actually look like.¹⁸⁷ A comparison of the qualitative differences between analyses of violence against women found in each report shows how the REMHI project emphasized psychosocial effects of gender violence, while the CEH's report focused on establishing a legal framework that explained why gender violence in Guatemala during the conflict does constitute a violation of human rights.

Each report had a specific reason for including a section dedicated to violence against women. The REMHI project found that women were susceptible to all of the same violations as were their families and communities. There were certain forms of violence suffered by women,

¹⁸⁷ REMHI, vol. 1, xx.

however, because they *were* women. For REMHI, the task was to recover women's historical memory of violence as victims and as protagonists in a resistance against a rupturing of the social fabric (i.e. family and community networks).¹⁸⁸ The CEH report agrees with REMHI in pointing out that women experienced violence as others did with the addition of gender violence. While the REMHI report does not distinguish at the outset between specific ethnic groups, the CEH does. According to the CEH, Maya women experienced generalized violence, gender violence, and racism at a higher degree than women from other ethnic groups.¹⁸⁹ For the CEH, this became an important fact that supported its claim that the Guatemalan military committed genocide.

Gaining access to women's experiences proved to be difficult for a variety of reasons, not least of which was women's reluctance to talk about sexual violence and a the use of euphemisms to refer to it. Women provided half of the testimonies that REMHI collected, but as the report notes, these testimonies did not say much about women's experiences as female victims of violence. As a result, REMHI interviewers had to re-interview female informants from a different angle. In these second interviews, the interviewers set out with the specific intention of learning about how violence affected women in their ability to meet the gender and social roles ascribed to them.¹⁹⁰ The CEH experienced similar difficulties. According to the CEH's report,

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 203.

¹⁸⁹ CEH, vol. 3, 13.

¹⁹⁰ REMHI, vol. 1, 203.

victims of wartime rape underreport sexual attacks. The CEH did not, however, explicitly state a need to conduct follow-up interviews. In Guatemala, the CEH found this to be the case more acutely because, for the military, the “spoils of war” included rape; culturally, rape came with the added connotations of shame and humiliation.¹⁹¹ Women—especially Maya women—tended to remain silent about their experiences of rape. The CEH had to decipher euphemisms, such as *pasar* and *usar*, that women and others used in their testimonies to replace the word “rape.”¹⁹² Another obstacle for the CEH was Maya women’s distrust of the state and affiliated agencies. Soldiers were the most common perpetrators in cases of rape against indigenous women.¹⁹³ Because the army was so closely identified with the state (and at many points in the country’s history was the state), Maya women had a strong distrust of government officials and did not report crimes committed against them. Women’s testimonies to the CEH told of numerous acts of violence, and if they did mention rape or gender violence, it was usually as an addendum rather than as the primary focus of the testimony.¹⁹⁴

Women experienced many forms of violence during the conflict. These included, according to REMHI, massacres, rape, torture, and humiliation.¹⁹⁵ For the REMHI project, it was necessary to analyze the objectives and

¹⁹¹ CEH, vol. 3, 20.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ CEH, vol. 3, 22.

¹⁹⁵ REMHI, vol. 1, 203.

symbolism behind these acts of violence for their social significance. Therefore, the entire first part of its chapter on violence against women attempts to unpack the symbolic heaviness of gender violence. In addition to the forms of violence that the REMHI report identifies, the CEH adds that in almost all cases it investigated, gender violence always equaled rape.¹⁹⁶

Rape in Guatemala was not an aberration; it was an act of power and dominance. On this point, both the CEH and REMHI agree, though their further characterization of rape diverges at a few points. For REMHI, rape was about power and dominance on behalf of the rapist over his victims.¹⁹⁷ In all of the testimonies that REMHI collected, the army, civil patrollers, and paramilitaries committed all of the rapes. For these perpetrators, rape underscored their position of power. It also served other purposes equally as sinister. Rape symbolized victory over an enemy.¹⁹⁸ Soldiers frequently forced men to watch as they raped their womenfolk. If the male targets of a village invasion managed to escape, soldiers attacked the women instead.¹⁹⁹ The reason for this, according to REMHI is that

...los cuerpos violados de las mujeres se convirtieron en un objetivo político para agredir a los otros (padres, hermanos, esposos, hijos) y al mismo tiempo demostrarles a las víctimas el desprecio de los victimarios por su condición femenina.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁶ CEH, vol. 3, 19.

¹⁹⁷ REMHI, vol. 1, 210. The use of a masculine subject is deliberate given that in this chapter REMHI only identifies male-on-female rape.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 212.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 213.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

Not only was rape a means of getting at a lost foe and a misogynic expression of disdain toward women, it also became a bargaining tool.²⁰¹ At times, perpetrators offered their female victims the option of rape over death. In many cases, the soldier or civil patroller murdered his victim anyway. One woman's rapist told her that if she entrusted herself to him, he would not harm her family. Says one of her surviving children,

Después supimos de boca del mismo responsable, le dijo a mi mamá que se dejara en manos de él y que los dejaba con vida, pero sí supo engañar a la víctima, pero primero la violó, luego la agarró a patadas, luego la fue a tirar viva sobre el puente de Pantelul.²⁰²

In other instances, soldiers included rape in the "spoils of war" due them. Women's bodies became property open to confiscation: "Se quedaron con terrenos, con buenos radios, con ganado y hasta con las mujeres de los que mataban".²⁰³ Clearly, rape reinforced the perpetrator's power over his victims.

The CEH also characterizes rape as a bargaining tool and as an act of power and dominance over persons perceived as inferior.²⁰⁴ However, the CEH diverges from the REMHI to the extent that it applied a legal framework to its analysis of rape.²⁰⁵ For the CEH, rape constitutes a violation of human

²⁰¹ Ibid., 214.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ CEH, vol. 3, 25, 32.

²⁰⁵ Another interesting difference is that while the REMHI report makes no mention of male-on-male rape, the CEH does assert that men and boys were also sexually assaulted in connection to the conflict. See CEH, vol. 3, 13.

rights and of international humanitarian law.²⁰⁶ Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, which Guatemala ratified in 1952, protects civilians from mistreatment and from becoming the targets of armed conflict.²⁰⁷ The way in which the CEH report draws direct connections between the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international humanitarian laws, all of which the Guatemalan government ratified either before or during the conflict serves two purposes. First, it shows just how the state violated its own adopted laws. Second, it lays a necessary foundation for future cases brought by victims and/or their family members against the state. Since rape also became a method of repressing political opposition and of inducing terror in civilian communities, the CEH argues that rape is more than just a tactic of war—it is a war crime.²⁰⁸ The effects of this distinction are yet unknown, but the implication is that this analysis of rape opens the door for the prosecution of perpetrators as war criminals.

Rape, and gender violence in general, was part of a broader counterinsurgency campaign that peaked in 1980-83. The REMHI report

²⁰⁶ CEH, vol. 3, 13. Rape violated Guatemalans' right to life, liberty, dignity, and protection from cruel and inhumane treatment. It also violated core rights that all states should offer its citizens. Furthermore, based on the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, rape also violates rights to freedom from torture, prisoners' rights to freedom from cruel treatment, and citizens' rights to protection from discrimination based on sex, race, and language (15). Since soldiers and civil patrollers also raped underage girls, rape violates the 1989 Convention on the Rights of Children.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰⁸ CEH, vol. 3. See pages 16, 31, 53.

discloses that based on the testimonies it received, project organizers could not conclude that rape was a premeditated part of the counterinsurgency campaign.²⁰⁹ Even so, the report does indicate that women's testimonies offered details of army practices sharing enough similarities that, at the very least, prove that rape was part of a "strategy of mass destruction."²¹⁰ In contrast, the CEH concludes that, in fact, rape was a systematic, widespread practice among government affiliates (namely, soldiers, civil patrollers, and police officers).²¹¹ It was part of military training and the entire chain of command was complicit, as evinced in this testimonial fragment: "El Ejército le llevaba putas a sus soldados y primero pasaba el subteniente y después todos los soldados durante una semana, algunos pasaban hasta diez veces. Cada tres meses las cambiaban [a las mujeres]".²¹² And in this one:

El oficial tiene sus grupitos de asesinos y les dice cómo tienen que matar. Hoy van a degollar o a guindar con alambres, hoy violan a todas las mujeres. Muchas veces las órdenes las dan antes...Violaban a las mujeres, las ponían a cuatro patas, luego les disparaban metiendo el arma en el recto o en la vagina...²¹³

Why were women especially vulnerable to violence—generalized and gender-based? For REMHI, the added component to women's susceptibility to violence was their sex and their role as mothers. Admittedly, the military

²⁰⁹ One explanation for this might be that the REMHI project began its work during the conflict and may not have had access to government or military documents declassified after the formal declaration of peace.

²¹⁰ REMHI, vol. 1, 216.

²¹¹ CEH, vol. 3, 13.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

targeted women as they did men. Nevertheless, their victimizers first saw them as a sexual object. As one victimizer recalls, women and men were equally tortured. For women, however, rape added to their suffering: Era parejo (el trato en la totura)...Lo que tenía la pobre mujer es que lo primer que hacían era violarla, de allí, ya de violarla pues, ya la toturaban [....].²¹⁴ As mothers in a wartime setting, women had to fend for themselves and their children. The army capitalized on this by abusing the children to “mentally control and dominate” the mother.²¹⁵ The CEH also identified certain factors that added to women’s vulnerability to violent (sexual) attacks. Women in flight who were pregnant and/or already had children, had to carry their children and supplies, such as food, utensils, and clothing.²¹⁶ This slowed them down and made it harder for them to successfully flee the ensuing army. Since women were often the one’s who stayed home while the men fled, went out to work in the fields, joined the guerrilla, or were forcefully conscripted into the civil patrols, they became easy targets for their attackers. One woman, for instance, was in her home when the military entered her village hunting for *guerrilleros*. “Los soldados vinieron a la casa y preguntaron por la guerrilla. Pidieron comida a la madre. Después de comer lo que ofreció la señora, se llevaron a su hija y la violaron”.²¹⁷ Finally, as participants in rights and justice organizations, women

²¹⁴ REMHI, vol. 1, 204.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 206.

²¹⁶ CEH, vol. 3, 34.

²¹⁷ CEH, vol. 3, 45.

became targets of violence that attacked them for stepping out of their place (i.e. the domestic sphere) and for opposing the status quo.²¹⁸ Women's susceptibility to gender violence was multi-layered; notably, so were their responses to it.

Women's responses to their own victimization and that of their families changed over time. On this topic, the CEH does not account for a transformation in women's perception of gender violence whereas the REMHI report does. According to the CEH, women had to adopt a submission role in order to avoid becoming targets. They were unable to see the violence they experienced as violations of their human rights because women were so convinced of their own culpability for what happened to them.²¹⁹ One of the only forms of agency that the REMHI ascribes to women is their approach to forced cohabitation. The CEH says, "La unión forzada se convirtió en muchos casos para las mujeres indígenas mayas en una forma de supervivencia ante las condiciones del enfrentamiento".²²⁰ Agreeing to a forced relationship with, for example, a civil patroller became for women a way to escape violent attacks and death. One woman shares her thought process when faced with the "choice" of cohabiting with a civil patroller:

Los soldados me dijeron que tenía que juntarme con un señor que me pretendía. El señor estaba en las patrullas [...] Yo me pongo a pensar porque no tengo dónde ir, no tengo casa, no

²¹⁸ Ibid., 51.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 42.

²²⁰ Ibid., 49.

tengo nada y los soldados dicen que me voy a juntarme con el señor, yo no puedo hacer otra cosa y por eso me junté con el señor...Me acuerdo mucho de mi esposo porque tenemos las mismas ideas, luchamos juntos por la vida con nuestros hijos y me pongo triste cuando me acuerdo porque a él ya lo mataron...No puedo decir lo que pienso porque el señor se va a enojar, así que me callo, no puedo decir a mi hija, ella es buena pero ya creció con las ideas de los ejércitos, ella dice que el señor es su verdadero papá, que el otro no le conoció, que a saber qué ando inventando, que son ideas malas...no puedo hablar con nadie, el señor no me deja ir a las reuniones...Como muda me mantengo, las palabras que digo no son las que quiero decir.²²¹

This woman took stock of her helpless situation and realized that she had no defense against the army's dictates. Moving in with the civil patroller did not free this woman. In fact, forced cohabitation shackled her on many levels. First, she could not express her grief over her husband's murder even though she thought of him often. His death represented lost companionship and support. The threat of the new man's anger forced her to suffer her grief in silence. Forced cohabitation also severed her connection to her children. In recounting how her daughter has "the ideas of the army," she describes an alienation from motherhood—of the ability to pass on her culture, her worldview, and her traditions to her children. In effect, this woman's daughter and "partner" silence her voice and her will. The CEH presents her testimony as an example the way forced cohabitation became a survival tactic for women. More than that, it is truly an example of the mental and physical

²²¹ Ibid.

subjugation of women and their lack viable choices. This woman may have survived, but her life in this situation is no life at all.

By contrast, REMHI's tracing of women's changing responses to their experiences of violence offers a more nuanced interpretation of the transformation of victim to historical actor. One of the major ways that women experienced generalized violence, as opposed to gender violence, was through the disappearance of a spouse and/or family member. At first, women who attempted to locate the missing met abuse from government officials and the military so frequently that the women began to wonder if maybe they had done something to deserve what was happening to them.²²² Women, as expressed in the following testimonial fragment, often ended up feeling impotent because of their condition as women:

Las esposas llegaron a reclamar a sus maridos y la respuesta del coronel Carballo fue: váyanse a la droga. Y las señoras volvieron asustadas y apenadas. Un año después el mismo coronel llamó a las señoras para informarles que sus maridos ya no existen.²²³

Their discouragement with the high degree of resistance they faced in their search for answers did not prevent women from stepping up to the new challenges they faced in the wake of political violence. Many women became sole providers for their family. Women had to step outside of their assigned

²²² REMHI, vol. 1, 219.

²²³ REMHI, vol. 1, 206. This testimony also offers an example of the way REMHI did not censor testimonies that included names of specific individuals involved in war crimes.

space—that of the home—and occupy spaces, like the field and the marketplace, that had traditionally been the exclusive domain of men. Some women had to learn new skills to make a living and to feed their children: “Aprendí a hacer tamales, todos los sábados haciendo tamales para que no les faltara, para que quedara uno siquiera para cada uno. Sembrando y vendiendo verduras para poder ir sobreviviendo”.²²⁴ It was a hard life, as one woman tells it,

Total, no se halla donde facilitar la vida y me dejaron con cuatro hijos, dos hijas y dos hijos, me costó verlos crecer, como pasé de hombre y mujer, tenía que corregir el trabajo del campo y de la cocina y así como mis hijos estaban chiquitos. Llos [sic] que se iban conmigo sufrían y los que se quedaban también. En fin yo trabajé un chingo para pasar esos días.²²⁵

Many women found their new tasks just as challenging. For some, these new duties helped them build a sense of self-worth: “Mis nietas buscan y encuentran trabajo en las casas y si no cortando cafe, yo percibo un ingreso de sesenta quetzales semanales, más lo que ganan mis nietas, nos vestimos bien como fruto del esfuerzo de nuestro trabajo”.²²⁶

Women had to fend for themselves and for their families. The testimonies included in REMHI’s chapter on violence against women demonstrate the courage with which women faced the difficulties and the angst of their new position as sole provider. In order to protect their families

²²⁴ Ibid., 222.

²²⁵ Ibid., 224.

²²⁶ Ibid., 229.

and preserve their communities, women stepped out of the home and learned new skills. They also confronted military and government authorities demanding to know the whereabouts of the disappeared. Women, according to REMHI, were the first to mobilize and organize in their search for their family members. They were the first to make a “demand for truth.”²²⁷ True, women’s experiences of violence had terrible physical, mental, social, and cultural consequences. Both the CEH and the REMHI report show this. The REMHI report takes it one step further by tracing a remarkable change in women’s responses to their experiences that led to their (re)affirmation. Women’s courage in the face of great repression revitalized peace, rights, and justice struggles in a period when so many forces colluded to stamp out all opposing forms of political expression.

Conclusion

In the 1980s, *testimonio* became a tool for people like Rigoberta Menchú to raise domestic and international awareness of Guatemala's violent internal armed conflict. Her story became a point of contention among North American academics who debated the meaning of (historical) truth and who had the authorial legitimacy to tell it. While this debate raged on, many within Guatemala were already adapting *testimonio* to a new era of official peace and truth commissions.

²²⁷ Ibid., 203.

Two reports, the REMHI and the CEH, presented survivor accounts of the effects and consequences of violence on the social body. Each report used testimonies in different ways. For the REMHI project, the driving force behind its report was the desire to listen to and inscribe the lost voices of so many victims. But, it did not simply reduce these testimonies to the pain contained within them. Testimonies told of pain and suffering, but they also told of strength, courage, and resiliency. Because the CEH's work was bound to official needs, that of telling an unbiased history of events, it had to find ways to present this history in a way that would empower victims and their families. Truly, these reports are at once alternatives and complements to each other. Together, they challenge the concept of a truth. They allow multiple voices to tell the same story with the same degree of authority over the telling. One cannot be read without the other.

But, why read these reports if neither one has legal weight? What good can they do now after fifteen years after the declaration of firm and lasting peace? It is fitting that the answer to these questions comes from one declarant's testimony.

Uno de los testigos muestra a la CEH restos de huesos de una de las víctimas. Lleva los restos en su moral envueltos en un plástico: "...me duele mucho cargarlos...es como cargar la muerte...no voy a enterrarlos todavía (...) Sí quiero que descance, descansar yo también, pero todavía no puedo...Son la prueba de mi declaración...no voy a enterrarlos todavía,

quiero un papel que diga a mí: 'lo mataron (...) y que no tenía delito, que era inocente...', entonces vamos a descansar".²²⁸

This statement conveys something that many trauma survivors can easily identify. The horror of the traumatizing act(s) is so extreme that, in the retelling, the survivor often wonders, "Did this actually happen? Is this really a part of my/our past? Of my/our memory—memory, that which is so solitary, so personal, so *me/us*?" Because of this disbelief, which perhaps in a way is a coping mechanism given that being a witness to violence, or the target of violence or abuse, is just so destabilizing, the survivor at times needs external verification that, yes, it did happen, yes, you are remembering correctly. This is why projects like truth commissions, with all of their faults, are so vital for the traumatized collective. It is not enough to decree a new era of peace. It is not enough to usher in democracy. The event, the act, of violence, must be inscribed. It must be taken out of the memory—that private space—of the survivor and placed in the historical record. The admission of it has to be put back into the realm of the symbolic, that which can be given language, if the social link is to be repaired, if the social body is to ever heal collectively.

²²⁸ CEH, vol. 12, back cover.

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