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Fact or Fiction: Constructing “Truths” in the Transition from Violence to Democracy

Silencing Patricia

In August 2001, I spent a month visiting my extended family in Guatemala City, Guatemala. This trip would prove to be a pivotal moment in my awareness of Guatemala’s turbulent history and the larger, global implications of its history of violence, impunity, and gross human rights violations. On this trip, I had the opportunity to witness firsthand the unfortunate circumstances of the country’s poorest, most discriminated group of people. Little did I know that this experience would culminate in a deeply sorrowful ending a few years later and would eventually serve as an illustration of the construction of truths and the silencing of numerous voices.

Patricia was eight years old when she began working as a maid (*muchacha* as they are colloquially known in Guatemala) in my grandmother’s house. She was a very thin, frail, malnourished Maya child forced to work in order to contribute to her family’s finances. Everyday, she would clean several different homes; she often carried out tasks that even for able-bodied adults would prove physically taxing. She rarely had on enough clothes to keep her warm and her shoes were pitiful things made of cheap plastic. One can only imagine how pained her young body must have been.

As an American, I perceived Patricia’s presence in many different ways. I was initially surprised that a child was employed as if she were an adult woman. I had never been exposed to child labor and I took for granted that a child’s only duty was to go to school. This child challenged all of my notions about what the role of children should be and what it actually was according to different contexts. Many times, I felt guilty whenever

I woke up late in the morning and saw that Patricia had already been there since very early in the morning, sweeping, mopping, scrubbing, washing. I knew that my grandmother needed her help because she was recovering from a mastectomy and was receiving chemotherapy. It did not occur to me that I, as a healthy American teenager, could also help (though I recognize now as an adult that if Patricia did not get money from working in my grandmother's house, she would have had to get it by working in someone else house). I also felt a great deal of sympathy and sadness for this little girl whose big brown eyes conveyed so much. Patricia, I am sure, had never experienced the kind of childhood that would have allowed her to run and play freely, make friends, pretend, imagine, and feel loved and nurtured. I frequently saw her stop her work for a few moments to look longingly at my younger cousins who were busy playing. I knew that this child was missing out on so much and that it just was not fair. The only way that I could think to help her was to give her extra money and tell her to buy herself a candy or a toy with it. I left Guatemala that summer with the memory of that child's sad little body burned onto my memory.

A few years later—Patricia must have been 11 years old by then—I received horrible news: Patricia had gone missing. She had spent the afternoon cleaning someone else's home and had vanished on the walk home. In the days following her disappearance, there surfaced many different speculations as to her whereabouts. One of those connected an unrelated crime to Patricia's absence. A week or two before she disappeared, Patricia had been witness to a murder in her neighborhood. As people tend to whisper among themselves, many of her neighbors knew that she had seen the murderer. Public airing of this information put Patricia in immediate danger, as her disappearance proved. Her mutilated body was found stuffed into the *pila* of a vacant house. Her throat had been

slashed. Patricia's murderer effectively silenced her forever by wounding her so violently. It is this act of silencing that has characterized the relationship of the holders of power in Guatemala with those firmly located within the margins of society.

Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the many ways that different factions within Guatemala have attempted to create a narrative of the internal armed struggle. The first step toward this end is to provide an historical overview of the conflict. Of particular interest are three narratives created during and after the conflict: the "official" story, truth and reconciliation reports, and *testimonio*. The goal is to compare and contrast the methods used to construct truths about particular events and how these "truths" are received by the public at large. It is important to look closely at the narratives created about such prolonged periods of violence and trauma, especially when the violence is so closely tied to the state, because of the implications this has on reconciliation efforts in post-conflict settings. This paper also seeks to answer why we question memory unless it is "official" and why a witness's memory is less valid than empirical data.

Historical Context

Beginning in 1954, Guatemala entered a period of conflict between conservative elements in political and social life and leftist, more progressive sectors of society. This specific year is frequently referred to as the demarcation point for studies about the Guatemalan civil war because it was the year in which the reformist president, Jacobo Arbenz, was ousted by a military coup.¹ Arbenz was accused of having communist ties partly because he was a strong supporter of agrarian reform. Another contributing factor to

¹ See Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States, 1944-1954*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991.

this was that Cold War politics defined 1950s international relations: one was either with or against the Communists. American involvement in Latin America also affected the internal politics of each individual country. In Guatemala, for instance, American corporations such as the United Fruit Company held large economic interests, which also translated into considerable political leverage. Once Arbenz's administration began appropriating land, American businessmen took their complaint to the CIA. For the CIA, an accusation of communist sympathies was enough to embark on a covert alliance to undermine Arbenz's presidency and his agrarian reform program.

Anti-communist rhetoric resonated with many people in Guatemala. To be specific, it resonated with those who had long-standing political, social and cultural power—the *ladinos* (non-Indigenous Guatemalans). The power of the *ladino* elite in Guatemala has deep roots in the colonial period. A marked division between the republic of the Indians and the republic of the Spanish defined Spanish American colonial society. Suffice it to say that the power was firmly concentrated in the republic of the Spanish. Indians were for the most part excluded from positions of power within society, in addition to being the victims of cultural marginalization based on European notions of superiority. This division between the powerful and the powerless remained largely intact across time. Large landowners in the twentieth century realized that their livelihood, power, and dominance was directly threatened by the possibility of having to give up land for the benefit of the disenfranchised Indian population.

The U.S.-backed coup succeeded in 1954 and ushered in a 36-year-long period of military rule. Resistance to this came from leftist groups, which beginning in the 1970s, became closely tied to the rural indigenous population. Soon, the rural resistance turned

into an active, armed confrontation between the Guatemalan army and the guerrilla. While much of the fighting took place outside of the capital in rural highlands of Guatemala, a general culture of fear began to develop.

The Guatemalan military employed a wide range of tactics that instilled fear deep in the hearts of its targets and radically affected the daily lives of countless people. In rural areas where the indigenous population outnumbered *ladinos*, the army carried out a counterinsurgency campaign that indiscriminately targeted men, women, and children of all ages. First of all, the army assumed that all Indians were somehow connected with the guerrilla. People could fall under army scrutiny for unfounded suspicions, and if these people could not deny any guerrilla connections to the army's satisfaction the result was often torture or death.² Second, once the army attacked a village, they subsequently recruited men and young boys into civil patrols that required them to detach from their community and become spies, army informants, and basically, an extension of army surveillance and control at the local level. Finally, soldiers participated in the victimization of countless women and young girls. Army personnel frequently raped women and girls as part of their terror campaign on Indian villages, they murdered or "disappeared" their male relatives, and they forced them to adopt new roles that in some cases, actually helped to empower them and raise their consciousness. The acute fear the military fostered did much to silence any survivors who feared that if they spoke out, they would put their lives and that of their loved ones at even greater risk.

Declaring An End to the Violence and the 1996 Peace Accords

² Scholars like Victoria Sanford and Jennifer Schirmer have written extensively about the army's premeditated attack on indigenous communities as well as the clandestine graves, the army's propaganda, and purposeful fear-building efforts.

In 1996, the Guatemalan government and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) culminated a series of attempts to end the armed conflict in part because neither side was winning after more than 30 years of confrontations. The culmination of these attempts for a peaceful end to the fighting was the signing of the *Acuerdo de paz firme y duradera* on 29 December 1996. In the first two lines of the Accord, the signatories—Guatemalan government, the URNG, and the United Nations (represented by Boutros Boutros-Ghali)—declare that the signing of the document ends more than three decades of armed confrontations. The Accord represents a united task of preserving and consolidating peace. It articulates the united efforts of the country to overcome the causes of the conflict and to build a stable base for new and enduring development. All of this is an historical and unbreakable pledge made in the name of posterity. In what follows, the document contains four main types of articles: statements about the peace process, articles pertaining to the rights of the Guatemalan people, assertions regarding the state's responsibilities, and prescriptions for making a successful transition to democracy.³

In the document, four articles make general statements about the peace process. Article 1 establishes the Peace Accord as a product of a national consensus and that meeting the directives of the Accord should always satisfy the common good. This first article conveys a sense of unity in the desire for peace. While the language is heartening in the sense that it makes one think that all Guatemalans longed for peace, it glosses over the reality that not all parties with a stake in the conflict sought a peaceful resolution. Article 5 acknowledges that vital to the construction of a unified nation is the acknowledgement of

³ "Acuerdo de paz firme y duradera," <http://www.congreso.gob.gt/Docs?PAZ/Acuerdo%20de%20paz%20firme%20y%20duradera.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2009).

the identity and rights of indigenous communities. The article makes clear that the base for a new democracy is the respect for and exercise of the political, cultural, economic, and spiritual rights of all Guatemalans. What this article refers to is the longstanding antagonism between *ladinos* and Maya communities and the importance of doing away with the racism that has underlined such antagonism.⁴ Article 8 addresses socioeconomic inequalities. It maintains that the route to sustainable development must include a rise in the standard of living, health, education, and safety for all Guatemalans. Finally, Article 14 concedes that the transition to democracy is a long one and that implementing the Peace Accord requires the cooperation of all parties involved.⁵

Citizens' rights are addressed in two of the articles. The right to know the truth about the human rights violations and the violence carried out during the conflict is a right afforded to "el pueblo de Guatemala." The rationale is that objectivity and impartiality will do much to promote national reconciliation and democratization. Various Guatemalan agencies, unfortunately, did much to undermine this particular article.⁶ The Ministry of Defense, for instance, obstructed access to evidence and prohibited regional command centers from cooperating with truth commission investigators. Article 6 addresses the economic rights of the citizenry. It claims that socioeconomic development must be orientated toward the common good and sustainability. Such development should be participatory and should respond to the needs of all sectors of society. This is another

⁴ See Charles Hale, *Más que un Indio: Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: School of American Research Press, 2006.

⁵ "14. La implementación de la agenda nacional derivada de los acuerdos de paz, constituye un proyecto complejo y de largo plazo que requiere la voluntad de cumplir con los compromisos adquiridos y el involucramiento de los Organismos del Estado y de las diversas fuerzas sociales y políticas nacionales. . . ."

⁶ Christian Tomuschat, "Clarification Commission in Guatemala," *Human Rights Quarterly* 23 (2001), 233-258.

article that has yet to come to fruition as is evidenced by the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's recent assertion that Central American countries still have gross income inequalities.⁷

The Accord also contains four principles that explicitly address the duties of the state in the conciliatory process. One of these is that the government must commit to guaranteeing and protecting the human rights of all Guatemalans.⁸ The rights referred to are those established in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Committing to protecting the human rights of all Guatemalans presupposes a general acceptance of the UDHR and a valuing of those rights as complementary and necessary to the country's social landscape. A continued level of violence, oppression, discrimination, and impunity shows that this commitment has been difficult to meet. Another responsibility of the state is to guarantee the safe return of all displaced peoples.⁹ These refugees of the conflict have a right to return and to live freely within the country's territory. Many people fled to Mexico, the United States, and other Central American countries to escape the violence. The state must also resolve existing land conflicts since rural areas are the most affected by poverty and the inequities and ineffectiveness of state institutions.¹⁰ What the document does not explain is the reason that rural areas are the

⁷ <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=22897&Cr=central&Cr1=america>

⁸ "2. El Gobierno de la República reafirma su adhesión a los principios y normas orientadas a garantizar y proteger la plena observancia de los derechos humanos, así como su voluntad política de hacerlos respetar."

⁹ "3. La población desarraigada por el enfrentamiento armado tiene derecho a residir y vivir libremente en el territorio guatemalteco. El Gobierno de la República se compromete a asegurar su retorno y reasentamiento, en condiciones de dignidad y seguridad."

¹⁰ "9. El Estado y los sectores organizados de la sociedad deben aunar esfuerzos para la resolución de la problemática agraria y el desarrollo rural, que son fundamentales para dar respuesta a la situación de la mayoría de la población que vive en el medio rural, y que es la más afectada por la pobreza, las iniquidades y la debilidad de las instituciones estatales."

most affected by poverty. Land distribution has been extremely unequal: a small land oligarchy holds the vast majority of the country's productive land. In sum, the state must guarantee protections and address longstanding socioeconomic problems. Finally, Article 7 states that all citizens should participate fully in all sectors of society and that it is the state's duty to ensure this by funneling public spending into social programs.¹¹

The remaining four articles of the document are prescriptions for making a democratic transition. Article 10 directs its attention to the military and its skill at undermining civil power. It states that in this new era of peace and democracy, the military must adjust its function and activities accordingly. Major adjustments should guarantee life, liberty, justice, security, peace, and development.¹² Article 11 addresses the reincorporation of the URNG into civilian life. Successfully reintegrating the "subversive" faction of any civil conflict is crucial to the transitional process since failure to do so would lead to retribution, discrimination, and ostracization against members of this group. In the Guatemalan case, *guerrilleros* were labeled by the state as a communist threat against the stability and progress of the country. In light of such vilification, the importance of Article 11 comes through quite clearly. The next article to address the transition, Article 12, argues in favor of constitutional reform. Changes to the constitution should foster a substantive and fundamental base from which to embark on the reconciliatory process. The inherent

¹¹ "7. Es fundamental para lograr la justicia social y el crecimiento económico, la participación efectiva de los ciudadanos y ciudadanas de todos los sectores de la sociedad. Corresponde al Estado ampliar estas posibilidades de participación y fortalecerse como orientador del desarrollo nacional, como legislador, como fuente de inversión pública y proveedor de servicios básicos, como promotor de la concertación social y de la resolución de conflictos. Para ello el Estado requiere elevar la recaudación tributaria y priorizar el gasto público hacia la inversión social."

¹² ". . .garantizar a los habitantes de la República la vida, la libertad, la justicia, la seguridad, la paz y el desarrollo integral de la persona. . . ."

goal is to create an environment in which the democracy and respect for human rights is protected *de jure*. Finally, Article 13 strongly points out that if Guatemala is to have a lasting and functional democracy, it must have an electoral process that upholds the power of the people. The message here seems to be that if democracy is to work, participation from below must complement official edicts toward the same end. In other words, the plan for a transition to democracy needs to be on paper, but the people must feel as though their participation is welcomed, required, and impactful.

The Peace Accords offered many concessions, acknowledgments, and instructions to help along the peace process, but it also had many shortcomings. For instance, the document as a whole does little to provide historical context for the conflict. It alludes to many things—a lack of protection of indigenous rights, human rights violations, a deep schism between the state and the revolutionary units—by explicitly stating a need for the defense against such things. In addition, the document does not allow for the assignation of blame. It does not name specific entities responsible for any aspect of the conflict, nor does it provide detail of the atrocities committed. The Peace Accord was necessary and important because it signaled the end of armed confrontations, but its potential for future reconciliation between the state and the traumatized populace was very weak.

Evaluating the *Comisión para el esclarecimiento histórico* (CEH)

In an effort to meet the call for the right articulated in Article 4 of the Guatemalan people to know the truth about human rights violations, the United Nations sponsored the establishment of a truth commission, *Comisión para el esclarecimiento histórico*. The driving purpose of the commission was to “. . . clarify the human rights violations and acts of violence committed during the armed confrontation. . .” It was composed of two

Guatemalan nationals and one foreigner, Christian Tomuschat. This mixture of nationals and foreigner ensured that there was a feeling of participation on the part of the country's citizenry while at the same time keeping a strict adherence to international human rights law at the fore. Even though the CEH worked under the mandate of clarifying, addressing internal and external factors, and making recommendations to help the transition to "peace and national unity" it had many faults.

According to the head of the commission, Christian Tomuschat, there were many obstacles from the very beginning. One of these was deciding on the limitations of scope. The Guatemalan government had been controlled by a series of dictatorships which meant that everyday of those dictatorships resulted in innumerable human rights violations. Thus, the CEH had to limit its scope to a specific period and specific violations committed in direct connection to the "armed confrontation." It gave priority to "... attacks on life and personal integrity, in particular extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances and sexual violations."¹³ Another obstacle was the issue of funding. Tomuschat points out that even though the Guatemalan government agreed to a set of accords that explicitly stated that one of the rights of Guatemalans was to know the whole truth about the violations committed during the conflict, it did not feel responsible for providing any type of funding. The CEH had to rely on the donations of outside sources, such as non-governmental organizations and foreign countries, to keep the project alive. Because of this, Tomuschat argues that "... the simple rule should apply that a nation desiring to look into its past must defray the costs of such an endeavor."¹⁴ These obstacles proved to be difficult for the

¹³ Ibid., 240.

¹⁴ Ibid., 248.

organization's internal operations, but they paled in terms of the challenges it faced on the public front.

The CEH faced two major prohibitions that negatively affected its report's public perception. The first of these was the time limit imposed on it. Initially, the truth commission was given six months to complete its investigation and its report. The rationale was based on the idea that a truth and reconciliation commission is to "... serve as the basis for the restructuring of governmental institutions"¹⁵ This proved to be a serious limitation since much of the source material for the report was the direct testimony of witnesses. Indigenous people formed a large majority of the witnesses, which meant that the investigators often had to travel to remote villages, which took a lot of time away from the actual interviews. In addition, the witnesses had in some cases spent years living in fear of reprisal for speaking out and, certainly, six months could not have been enough time for them to recover from their trauma enough to give testimony. In the end, the commission presented its report in 1999, three years after the signing of the Peace Accord.

The greatest obstacle, however, that the CEH faced was that it was explicitly prohibited from assigning individual blame for the violent acts and the human rights violations committed at the height of the conflict. The reasoning behind this was the naming names would require legal action, specialized governmental units carrying out the crimes obviously worked hard to leave no traces behind, and lesser criminals might be identified while other perpetrators responsible for gross human rights violations might go unpunished.¹⁶ The report did acknowledge that the Guatemalan army had indeed embarked on a genocidal campaign and that in many cases it was responsible for a large

¹⁵ Ibid., 243.

¹⁶ Ibid., 244.

percentage of the crimes. Government officials and human rights organizations received these findings with a mixed reception. On the one hand, government officials were unhappy that the army's responsibility for over 80% of the crimes became part of the official record; this information on the other hand made human rights organizations happy. Even this acknowledgement, however, did not erase completely the dissatisfaction many people felt over not having specific names of the perpetrators who carried out genocidal acts of violence. All of these limitations and pitfalls is what the Catholic Church responded to when it decided to produce a report of its own.

Producing an alternative “truth” through *testimonios*

An alternative to the “official” history and “truths” presented by formal organizations, such as the CEH, comes in the form of testimonial narrative, *testimonios*. This type of history is based on individual memory. Producers of *testimonios* are frequently direct witnesses to crimes. In the Guatemalan case, providers of this type of narrative were from the Maya communities that directly experienced the wrath of the military. In what follows, I will discuss the role of testimonial literature basing my discussion on the points presented by Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney in “Voices for the Voiceless: Testimonial Literature in Latin American Art.” This article will provide a basis for a discussion centered on the most popular example of testimonial narrative to be produced about the Guatemalan civil war: *I, Rigoberta Menchú, An Indian Woman in Guatemala*.

Traditional literature contains naturalized ideas of dominance and superiority. In any social setting, those individuals who hold power and have the ability to dominate are typically the ones who write literature. According to Gugelberger and Kearney, these individuals “. . . tend to represent and naturalize difference as it is seen from their social

and cultural position.”¹⁷ The way this translates into literature is that the only voice that comes through to the reader is that of the dominator. This voice does little to explain the subordinate character because any and all difference is natural, taken for granted, and therefore needs no deeper explanation(s).

Colonialism makes such naturalization of dominance and superiority even more evident. Colonialism has played a dominant role in literature produced on or about colonial situations. Authors have tended to write from positions of power and “... from the centers of empire”, which means that their gaze is always from the top-down, outside-in. Writing from positions of (colonial) dominance means that the writer sets himself up as the authority, the one and only voice. Any representation of the receiver of this gaze is a complete construct rooted in a very specific, singular worldview, class position, and bias. No other voices come through as actors, making traditional literature essentially a binary separation of the authorial voice (agent/actor) plus multiple objects.

Testimonial literature is an attack on the traditional relationship of the dominant actor to the subordinated object. One of the ways testimonial literature acts upon the imbalance of power in the traditional type is by changing the producer: “... testimonial literature is produced by subaltern peoples on the periphery or the margin of the colonial situation.”¹⁸ What ends up happening by turning the tables and allowing the people in the margins to speak about the margins is a remaking of Western notions of “truth.”

Because testimonial literature is in a sense correcting the hegemonic representation of the colonial subject/condition, it requires a radically different method of production and

¹⁷ Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney, “Voices for the Voiceless: Testimonial Literature in Latin America,” *Latin American Perspectives* 18, No. 3 (1991): 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

reception. In contrast to traditional forms of literature where the author puts pen to paper directly, testimonial literature often requires intermediaries. Usually, the witness provides his or her testimony to an editor who carries out the actual writing of the text. Whereas in traditional literature the author is the focal point, in testimonio "... the structure and practice of producing [it] erodes the centrality of the author and also thereby standard assumptions about the "authority" of texts ..."¹⁹ Sometimes the testimonio has gone through several different filters—witness to editor to translator—further diffusing and displacing the importance of the authorial voice. The subject of a testimonial narrative is a "protagonist" whose motivations differ from the traditional author. This "protagonist," explain Gugelberger and Kearney, is part of a very particular context and sees him/herself as being the voice for the group, not of the individual. For the witness giving testimony, the usual motivation is to give a history of a group, not a personal record.

Testimonial literature is a tool easily used in areas that have experienced important social upheaval. Reading testimonial literature requires that it be placed (and remain firmly rooted) in the context of the major sociopolitical and cultural changes brought about by revolutions in the so-called Third World. The centrality of the context and the collective history makes testimonial literature a very effective way of grabbing the attention of international readers. According to the authors, this genre came into vogue in Latin America as early as the 1960s and the many revolutions of the period.²⁰ Finally, testimonial literature offers a particular insight into Latin American realities because the givers of testimony are not bound to as many constraints (style, publishing demands, bestseller syndrome) as Western authors.

¹⁹ Ibid., 10.

²⁰ Ibid., 5, 11.

Rigoberta Menchu's *Testimonio*

In 1983, Rigoberta Menchu's *testimonio* attracted international attention to the plight of Guatemala's Maya community. Rigoberta's testimony exemplifies many of the points mentioned above about the nature of this form of literature. Despite all of the controversy that her autobiography created over questions of validity, accuracy, and trustworthiness, this example of *testimonio* holds much potential. These final words will show the ways Rigoberta's *testimonio* fits into the testimonial literary genre and how it stacks up against the "official" history presented in the CEH report.

Rigoberta's autobiography follows many of the techniques of the testimonial as literary genre. For instance, Rigoberta's story is very much connected to the stories and experiences of the Maya community. She touches on issues (such as ladino/Indio antagonism, conflicts over land rights, poverty) that are not unique to her personal experience and that affect the poor and the Maya throughout the country. Readers can get a sense very early in the story of the importance of a community-based worldview. Throughout her story, Rigoberta brings in anecdotes to illustrate points she has made about the lived realities of the Maya peasantry. She does not limit her anecdotal references to herself or to her immediate family. Instead, she tells of many different individuals. Some of these stories include the tale of an Indian maid whose contract stipulated higher pay if she initiated the masters' son into the world of sex; she tells of the raping of women by soldiers in a rural village; she offers a soldier's lament that humanizes the military figure²¹; and she includes the story of Petrona Chona, a community activist who was murdered by the military in broad daylight in front of her community. In offering readers the stories of

²¹ Menchú, 148. "If one side doesn't kill me, the other will."

so many indigenous actors, Rigoberta is constructing a multi-vocal narrative that challenges the official representation of the Indian. She effectively provides an alternative history of her group.

The making of her autobiography also falls in line with the many contrasts between the production of traditional literature and testimonial narrative. Rigoberta explains that she decided to learn Spanish while she was still in Guatemala because she started becoming increasingly aware of the few opportunities for change, progress, and success and that there were many for pain, suffering, and sorrow.²² She realized that since there is so much ethnic and linguistic diversity within the Maya community, she would have to find a way of communicating and spreading the ideas of progress and unity. Rigoberta realized that the language of the powerful in Guatemalan society was (and continues to be) Spanish. Participating as a catechist opened up her path for education and for learning this second language. Rigoberta told her story to a Frenchwoman in Spanish. The process of translation that occurred as Rigoberta told her story in her second language to a woman whose second language was also Spanish sheds lights on how very different the production of testimonial narrative can actually be.

The fact that Rigoberta's story is different in terms of the way it was produced and the way it emphasizes the importance of the group over the individual also demonstrates the motivations that typically drive testimonial narrative. Rigoberta was concerned with providing a history of a group: the Guatemalan Maya. Since this was her primary motivation, the thread of the narrative changed, as did the way she brought up certain things. Central to her testimony is the idea of memory as a source. As she recounts certain

²² Ibid., 88.

things, she slowly starts remembering other things. This is similar to the way memory works in conversation. Because *testimonio* relies on memory, it is easier for non-literate persons to use this as a vehicle for telling their story.

Rigoberta's story, and that of so many others, is not without its own negative aspects. For one, the nature of testimonial narrative's reliance on memory calls into question its credibility. Detractors of this form of telling one's tale claim that memory is too faulty a source. It seems that empirical date often carries more weight and legitimacy than memory. This brings of a central question of this paper, which has yet to be answered: why is "official" history that is backed up by quantifiable date received and believed much more readily than alternative stories based on witnessing? One explanation for this is that in many cases, the person giving testimony is one of a few other witnesses (and sometimes the only witness) and of course is making "... sense of terror and survival in their own way within their own cosmology."²³ What this means is that everyone tries to make sense of things in their own ways, through the lenses of their accumulated experiences, and provides explanations for events according to this idiosyncratic worldview. So, if three different people witness a particular event, it makes perfect sense that the reasoning they give for why certain things happen will be different. Each witness injects their own personal experience into the event. But, as Victoria Sanford so eloquently puts it in her discussion of the CEH's fact gathering method is that

The only certainty one can have in the study of genocide is that all we can learn and document from investigating these types of atrocities, regardless of our methodologies, is that the very destructive force that is the essence of genocide

²³ Victoria Sanford, "From I Rigoberta to the Commissioning of Truth: Maya Women and the Reshaping of Guatemalan History," *Cultural Critique* 47 (2001): 37.

impedes our ability to ever fully document, know, or understand the totality of the devastation.²⁴

What this suggests is that memory, like empirical data, is never totally accurate or illuminating, which in essence means that they are equally useful as sources. In any case, what they both show us is that trauma occurred, that it does in fact exist undeniably.

Of course, Rigoberta Menchú's autobiography is not free of problems. For example, she often makes reference to the differences between Indians and *ladinos* as if these were natural. Readers are left wanting a more contextualized, and nuanced, explanation of the historical construction of difference. Since this is not done, the danger of perpetuating essentialized notions of difference is very real, particularly when the reader has no prior knowledge of the Guatemalan context. One cannot know the true extent to which this presentation of difference serves to reinforce fissures within the larger Guatemalan society based on notions of superiority and difference. In addition, Rigoberta's presentation of village life is too bucolic for the critical reader. Almost everything is ascribed to cosmological meanings, religious affect, and the like, which often serves to make more acute the reader's skepticism. It cannot be that everything within Maya communities is harmonious. These problems underline the importance of approaching this form of literature with a different gaze since the content itself and the way it was produced is different from so many traditional forms of literature.

Conclusion

The histories of the armed conflict in Guatemala are many and in some cases, radically different from each other. This paper started out with an anecdote about a young

²⁴ Ibid., 42.

Maya girl whose voice was forever silenced by a criminal who did not want his crimes to be aired. Patricia's voice is only one among many thousands of voices that have been silenced for decades and that continue to be violently interrupted. As has been shown here, two types of histories—an "official" history and a testimonial narrative—have been employed to represent the "truth" of the Guatemalan experience of violence. Both forms of truth-telling carry important implications, strengths and weaknesses. Both have done much to clear the air in the aftermath of war, but so to do they fall short of providing a complete picture. Many questions remain unanswered and all seem to deal with the notions of truth and legitimacy. To be sure, it is outside the confines of this paper to pit one form of writing history against another, but it is important to highlight the usefulness of having multiple "truths" and to always keep in mind that what is taken for granted as the truth is actually a product of many different motivations, preconceptions, limitations, and interests. The reader has the responsibility of maintaining a critical enough eye that continues to allow for a multiplicity of voices.