

**TELLING MAYA TALES:  
POINTS OF VIEW IN GUATEMALA**

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**W. George Lovell, Department of Geography, Queen's University, Canada**

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Between 1961 and 1996, civil war in Guatemala claimed the lives of almost a quarter-million people, nine out of ten of whom (according to the findings of a United Nations Truth Commission) were indigenous Mayas. For the native peoples of Guatemala, conquest is not a remote, historical episode but very much a daily, lived reality. Survival over the centuries is cause for cultural celebration, even though it has come at enormous group and individual expense, as both written and oral records attest. The Archive of the Indies in Seville is a contested repository of experience, the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú yet another. In this light, narrating the story of one Maya family raises questions related to ongoing insecurity, lack of justice, and uninvestigated crimes, the combined effects of which still haunt and charge community life, especially in rural Guatemala. Telling about what happened to Magdalena González and her family also raises, from a theoretical standpoint, issues concerning the challenges of representation and how fieldwork can, on occasion, yield unimagined but heartening returns.

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*We always did feel the same, we just saw it from a different point of view.*

Bob Dylan, "Tangled Up in Blue" (1974).

Like many scholars of my generation, I have been aware of debates about point of view in the social sciences since my days as a graduate student in the 1970s. Back then our first palpable sense of the importance of perspective, of knowing something about who was telling the story and where they we were coming from, arose from wrestling with the ideas of David Harvey, a courageous as well as critical thinker whose influence now reaches well beyond the confines of the discipline to which both of us acknowledge allegiance -- geography. Harvey was in his formative thirties when he set new standards for the principles of geographical inquiry with his *Explanation in Geography* (1969). No sooner had he grounded us in positivist methodologies and scientific rationale, however, when he changed course and forced us to think again. His *Social Justice and the City* (1973) demolished the myth of objectivity, arguing in favor not just of engaged practice but of Marxist *praxis*. Geography in the English-speaking world, not sure how to get out of its "quantitative revolution," and wondering how it got there in the first place, was suddenly invigorated, and has not been the same since. Nor, for that matter, have notions across the social sciences about the primacy of space in shaping everyday life, in no small measure thanks to Harvey's trenchant analyses of the state of the world and the role of capital in creating it (1). Meanwhile, as the bodies of the dead piled up, the Vietnam War wound down. These were heady, historic times, epitomized for me by Bob Dylan's

seminal album, *Blood on the Tracks* (1974), a vortex in which musicians of different persuasions than Dylan himself, ideological and otherwise, have since sought solace and succor, Brian Ferry and the Indigo Girls among them. “Tangled Up in Blue,” the opening cut of *Blood on the Tracks*, lends itself to an array of interpretations, but a potent mix of loss, yearning, and regret, of learning about life the hard way, charges Dylan’s narrative, whether sung in heartfelt first person or delivered with a shift in perspective from a no less wounded third.

### **Views from Alexandria**

Awed by Dylan’s song-writing prowess and struck though I was by Harvey’s *volte-face*, it was from reading Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet* (1957-1960) that I learned most about the dynamics of viewpoint. The first book in the series, *Justine* (1957), captivated me with its dissection of people’s lives in Alexandria on the eve, during, and in the immediate aftermath of World War II. However, the events and circumstances about which a young schoolteacher, Darley, informs us in *Justine* contrast starkly with how the very same episodes are recounted in *Balthazar* (1958a) and *Mountolive* (1958b), all three accounts narrated from quite distinct but nonetheless decidedly male perspectives. Not until *Clea* (1960), the final installment of the quartet and, in Durrell’s own words, a “true sequel” as opposed to a “sibling,” is one afforded a semblance of closure. After *Clea* attempts to set the record straight -- she is by far, to my mind, the most sympathetic character we hear from -- the author’s stated goal then becomes that much clearer. “I have turned to science,” Durrell (1958a: 8) writes, “and am trying to complete a four-decker

novel whose form is based on the relativity proposition.” Albert Einstein, among others so engrossed, would emphatically have approved.

### **Views from the Archive**

The “relativity proposition” was one that I “turned to” myself when a period of research in the Archive of the Indies in Seville (Lovell 2001) unearthed a fascinating array of documents pertaining to forced native resettlement by Spanish missionaries in sixteenth-century Guatemala (Lovell 1990). Enthralled though I was at finding a bounty of letters purporting to be eyewitness accounts, my joy was soon tempered when I discovered that the testimony of Dominican friars was at odds with that of their Franciscan counterparts. My attempts to make sense of the situation, if not resolve it, hinged on realizing that self-interest on both sides far outweighed their preoccupation about native welfare. Much of the antipathy so vehemently expressed is articulated in relation to Alonso de Zorita, a judge appointed by royal authority to impose order on the unlawful actions of Spaniards and what was perceived to be unruly if not seditious behavior on the part of the Indians. Two extracts from a thick dossier epitomize how difficult, if not impossible, it can be to reconcile evidence. We hear, first, from four Franciscans, and next from two Dominicans. One of the most striking features about delving into the documents is realizing how much the traumas of the twentieth century, from a Maya perspective, mirror those of the sixteenth.

On New Year's Day, 1556, friars Pedro de Betanzos, Alonso Mella, Antonio Quejada, and Juan de la Cruz wrote to the Crown protesting against Zorita's stubbornness and heavy-handedness, especially with respect to his bringing the natives to heel. In their eyes, Zorita "does not know [anything] about the peoples or the languages of this land," whereas the Franciscans consider themselves "well versed in the languages and conversion of these new peoples" (2). They point out that "for eight years we have rounded up Indians who used to live in the mountains and in caves and have grouped them in settlements so as to facilitate their indoctrination." The friars claim that, "things not being quite to the liking of Licenciado Zorita, he has forced many people to settle in lands very different in climate than those to which they are accustomed." They voice particular concern because Zorita insisted that people be moved "from cold lands to hot lands, on account of which many Indians died and others fell sick." The toll of an arduous forced march was even greater because it occurred "during the rainy season, and a very wet one at that." All this was carried out, furthermore, "without beforehand inspecting where people would be moved to, which for the most part are barren lands, in contrast to the fruitful, healthy, and pleasant ones from which they were removed." The situation was parlous, but worse was to come. Some Indians refused to yield to Zorita's dictates, considering themselves "wronged and offended." Zorita's response was to raze to the ground "[not only] their homes [and] places of residence [but also entire] towns." The Franciscans, in an aptly apocalyptic tone, allege that "the fire that raged resembled the Day of Judgment." Chaos reigned, with roads and trails thronged "with poor Indian women, tied as prisoners, carrying children on their backs," struggling to fend for

themselves because “their husbands, through fear, took off for the mountains.” Only during “the time that these people were conquered” could the friars recall such a painful spectacle. Two tragic incidents are singled out as an indictment of Zorita and his policies:

Your Majesty should know that one poor man was being forced by Licenciado Zorita to move from where he resided, and where he could support himself, to another place where he could no longer support himself, or his wife or children. He hanged himself, and died in despair. Another poor woman was being taken from her home to be settled in a place six leagues away. Her husband fled to the hills after he saw that the town he inhabited had been set on fire. Her children, seeing their mother held captive, became frightened, and jumped from a cliff, killing themselves. All this we have witnessed first hand, without mentioning countless other injustices these miserable people have suffered and still endure.

No matter how strongly their words were conveyed, Franciscan appeals to Zorita fell on deaf ears, as indeed did those of native leaders, whom “through ignorance” Zorita had stripped of the authority bestowed on them “by their ancient laws.” So widespread and vociferous was indigenous dissent that “great unrest” wracked the land, leading the friars to request of the King, “in the name of our Order, and also on behalf of many native leaders,” that Zorita be removed from an office they deemed him unfit to serve.

The Dominicans, whose spokesmen were Fray Tomás de Cárdenas and Fray Juan de Torres, saw things differently. Torres considered Zorita “one of the best judges that Your Majesty has in [all] the Indies” (3); he and Cárdenas urged the King not to be duped by “false information” spread about Zorita by Spaniards whose “worldly interests” were threatened by the judge’s convictions (4). One polemical ruling of Zorita’s was to exempt Indians from paying tribute for a year while they constructed living quarters and planted crops in and around the new settlements to which they had been required to move. Local

*encomenderos* whose privileges were affected, to whom “a year without tribute seems intolerable,” were primarily those responsible for stirring things up. They found support for their views among the Franciscans, a monastic order that competed with the Dominicans in the battle to save Indian souls. Cárdenas and Torres are careful to state that what they have to say pertains to the mountains, or *serranía*, surrounding their spiritual base in Sacapulas. Writing from there, part of their defense of Zorita runs:

In March 1555 Zorita visited the Serranía of Sacapulas where, with the counsel of the High Court, the Bishop, and the Provincial of our Order, he brought together some settlements as a way of ensuring the more effective conversion of the Indians. With respect to this relocation, we feel, as would anyone without prejudice, that Zorita acted as both a good Christian and a good agent of Your Majesty, that what he did was justified, far more worthy of honor than of reproach. This part of the country is among the most rugged and broken in all Guatemala, where there used to be groupings of eight, six, and even four houses or huts, tucked and hidden away in gullies in which, until the arrival of one of us, no other Spaniard had ventured. Because native settlements were so scattered, it was well-nigh impossible to instruct their inhabitants in matters that concern our Holy Faith, for the Indians remain attached not only to their homes but also to the practice of superstitions and idolatry. Now that they are housed together they will have less opportunity to resort to their evil living, and ourselves be better placed to watch over them, and ensure their proper human conduct. No Christian will consider the manifold advantages of relocation and indoctrination, on balance, to be a bad thing. They may only say that it was carried out against the will of the Indians, in response to which we assert that there is no sick person who finds the taste of medicine pleasant. Not even Your Majesty could execute something successfully if he had to guarantee the happiness and secure the consent of all.

As to what we hear are the consequences of Zorita’s actions -- that some Indians hurled themselves from cliffs in despair at being resettled -- we say this: of other parts of Guatemala we no nothing, but regarding Sacapulas and surrounding areas we assure Your Majesty that no such thing has occurred, that it must be the dreams and inventions of those who are angered at the creation of new settlements. Zorita has carried out his tour of inspection with the greatest diligence, placing under guard Your Majesty’s decrees, favoring and defending the Indians with all his strength, seeing that *encomenderos* are punished for their excesses and tyranny. Thus they feel themselves to be slighted, and proceed to make things up, readily finding witnesses to corroborate what they allege, so that

they can strike down or elevate whomever they wish, if one is not aware of their actions. In a life in which death comes to all, we see with what little remorse and with how few scruples people imagine what they want to about whomever they want to, and how they then believe what they have imagined, without fear of God. We therefore beseech Your Majesty to be on the highest alert, so that the malice of such people not sully the reputation of good men who endeavor only to serve God and your Majesty (5).

Cárdenas and Torres give us much to ponder. Why *encomenderos* hated Zorita is clear enough, but the documents sent to Seville are inconclusive as to what Franciscan motives were in opposing him. What might Zorita have done, or ordered be done, that would so enrage the Franciscans yet earn Dominican approval? His reformist tendencies conflicted with the material concerns of *encomenderos* and upset them no end. Their hostility is understandable. The negative attitude of the Franciscans is more difficult to fathom. Perhaps Zorita's family, back in Spain, belonged to the lesser nobility that supported the brothers of Santo Domingo, as is evidenced by the judge having been schooled at the University of Salamanca, historically the seat of Dominican instruction. Certainly Zorita had a reputation for being strict and uncompromising; once he made up his mind he stuck to it. If, then, he decreed that Indians already living in one place be moved to another, such a move would not be welcomed by Franciscans who wanted native charges to remain where they had grouped them together. What would incense Franciscans even more, however, would be if Indians were told not just to relocate but relocate to a site that saw them enter Dominican-administered territory and take up residence in settlements there.. Though it is impossible to determine from the documents exactly what took place, this scenario is the most likely cause of Franciscan resentment -- a sense of being undermined, and usurped, by rulings that benefited a rival faction. "Man

may embody truth,” Franz Kafka contends, “but he cannot know it” (6). Truth in this instance, or so the balance of evidence suggests, was a casualty of ecclesiastical feuding and the desire for territorial aggrandizement, in which competing monastic goals proved as disruptive of native welfare as the repercussions of conquest (Lovell [1985] 2005).

Entrapped four centuries later between guerrilla insurgents and a lethal counter-insurgency unleashed to eliminate them, Maya communities in Guatemala paid a similar high price for being caught in the crossfire, literally and not just metaphorically (Lovell [1995] 2010).

### **A Postmodern Perspective**

In the meantime, while trying to link archival evidence with conceptual musing, in relating the challenges of ethnohistory to the demands of ethnography, I found discussions about the “crisis of representation” strategically helpful (7). The best of these discussions call for us to grapple, as scholars and teachers, with how knowledge is constructed and whose interests it best serves, especially as it relates to cultures markedly different than those of our own, ones with predominantly western roots and shaped by western values. I see no guaranteed solutions, but acknowledge that if the goal of social science is critical engagement in the pursuit of learning, then it is imperative that interpretation of data be tight, creative, and contextualized, that ambiguity, contradiction,

divergence, and incompatibility be recognized and dealt with. This holds as much for textual sources as oral testimony: people lie, and embellish or distort what has befallen them, and so do the documents they leave behind. Figuring out how to proceed, therefore, is no easy matter, and can trigger what to my mind constitutes little more than indulgent soul searching, misguided hand wringing, and (at worse) investigative paralysis. For me, anthropologist Clifford Geertz who has proven the most judicious of commentators in this regard. He cuts to the heart of the matter thus:

What once seemed only technically difficult, getting “their” lives into “our” works, has turned morally, politically, even epistemologically, delicate... The end of colonialism altered radically the nature of the relationship between those who ask and look and those who are asked and looked at. The decline of faith in brute fact, set procedure, and unsituated knowledge in the human sciences, and indeed in scholarship generally, altered no less radically the askers’ and lookers’ conception of what it was they were trying to do. Imperialism in its classical form, metropolises and possessions, and Scientism in its, impulsions and billiard balls, fell at more or less the same time. Things have been less simple since, on both the Being There and Being Here sides of the anthropological equation... But it has been [like] that before and found a direction. What it hasn’t been, and... hasn’t so much had to be, is aware of the sources of its power (8).

Anthropology at its best, Geertz believed, should strive to see the world “from the native’s point of view,” the title of one of his most celebrated essays (Geertz 1983). In the context of Guatemala, given the ability of Maya peoples to develop writing systems and record their own versions of events from around A.D.250 on, we are fortunate to be able to elicit “the native’s point of view” directly. It was expressed textually in pre-Columbian times, often to dazzling aesthetic effect, on the surface of alabaster, bone, jade, obsidian, onyx, parchment, pottery, shell, stone, and wood (Brotherson 1992). Conquest by imperial Spain resulted in Maya peoples adapting their ways of writing to European

conventions, which involved learning how to use the Latin alphabet and producing such pivotal works as the *Popol Vuh* and the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, two noted examples of a vast indigenous output (see Carmack 1973). Oral tradition also runs deep among the Maya, tapped by modern-day researchers not only to record “the native’s point of view” but also to authenticate and enrich their own (B. Tedlock [1982] 1995; D. Tedlock 1992). As Geertz asserts, however, the undertaking can be decidedly “delicate,” as the controversy generated by the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú attests.

### **A Nobel Cause**

First given a voice in Spanish by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, then in French, English, and a dozen or so languages thereafter, the K’iche’ Maya woman already enjoyed world-wide recognition by the time she was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. Menchú’s global appeal is certainly not lost in translation; it hinges on what she stresses at the outset of her narrative, that her story “is the story of all poor Guatemalans.” On this she is perfectly clear:

This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only *my* life; it's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything in my life that's happened to me since there have been many very bad times but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what happened to me has happened to many other people too.... My personal experience is the reality of a whole people (9).

The text that Burgos-Debray created from twenty-four hours of taped conversations with Menchú, conducted over the course of a week spent together in Paris, is not without its

flaws. As with most such testimonies, Menchú is often repetitious, vague, obscure, and inconsistent. Discrete episodes are collapsed to become a single event, time and place juxtaposed in ways that irritate academic purists. Empowering “an Indian woman in Guatemala” to speak for “a whole people” inevitably triggered unease and suspicions about the veracity and legitimacy of such a claim, indeed the existential basis upon which it rested and was articulated. An “exposé” by David Stoll (1999) in turn sparked a rejoinder to his lugubrious post-mortem (Arias 2001), a forum to which a colleague and I contributed. We concluded that Stoll “could easily have arranged his findings to support what Menchú has to say as much as criticize her for how she goes about saying it” (10). Stoll appears not the least bit interested in such reconciliation, instead believing that, unless Menchú’s narrative can withstand being held accountable to the test of social science norms, imperfections revealed in the course of the exercise tarnish her testimony, cast doubt over its factual accuracy, and thus render it suspect if not spurious. It is then a logical next step to denounce the entire narrative as mere fabrication or perhaps even lies, grist to the mill of Menchú’s detractors and political adversaries, of whom there are many, both inside Guatemala and beyond its borders.

Having served as a translator for Menchú during one of her North American solidarity tours before she became a Nobel laureate (Lovell [1995] 2010), I was well aware of the difficulties of cross-cultural communication. Menchú, however, relayed her message to one packed church hall after another with such dignified assurance that questioning her authority or authenticity was not an issue. Neither, for that matter, was the thorny business of power, as Menchú made it clear at the outset that my job was to

concentrate on putting her words into English. She alone, in terms of our relationship, would shape her narrative, be its sole architect, influence its texture, and assume responsibility for audience reaction by drawing upon her skills as a seasoned orator.

### **The Story of Magdalena González**

Magdalena González had none of Menchú's attributes and acumen, but her story too is one shared, if not by "all Guatemalans," then by a good many, especially those who lived (and died) in K'iche' country during the ravages of civil war. I met Doña Magdalena while again serving as a translator, on this occasion for a documentary film series shot on location in Guatemala (Cambridge Studios 1996). Two camera crews were dispatched to film the unit that also featured my research activities. The first was headed by Lance Wisniewski, the second by Patricia (Pat) Gouvdis, who had earlier incorporated Doña Magdalena into a documentary she made about the impact of war on children in Central America, *If the Mango Tree Could Speak* (1993). Though I was pleased to participate in a film project, and respect very much what both Pat and Lance achieved, I felt that something was missing in their portrayals, something that only textual narration could make up for. I wanted Doña Magdalena to be more than a face and a voice; I wanted her words, albeit articulated by me, to be heard while being read from the printed page. With her approval, and that also of surviving members of her family, I set about the task of gathering information with the goal of writing about their experiences. The book I envisioned arising from such an engagement, though drawing on my academic background and training as a cultural geographer, was one that I hoped would appeal to

the general public while at the same time also having something to offer an audience with more erudite, scholarly tastes.

After several visits and interviews I considered I had sufficient material to put pen to paper. When I did so I leaned on how other colleagues had tackled similar objectives while conducting research on Guatemalan women, Marilyn Anderson and Jonathan Garlock (1988), Margaret Hooks (1993), and Emilie Smith-Ayala (1991) among them. I ruled out a “direct voice” approach, as Burgos-Debray had opted for with Menchú, since Doña Magdalena had neither the temperament nor the inclination to be tape-recorded with a hand-held microphone for long periods. Aware that control of narration would be in my hands, I sought to clarify and check what was told me as much as possible, asking the same questions time and again, which surely tried people’s patience. In the end, it all came down to mutual trust and confidence, as Linda Green (1999) and Judith Zur (1998) emphasize in their in-depth work on Maya women made widows by civil strife in Guatemala.

Is it possible, under any circumstances, to tell someone else’s story? Perhaps not, at least without becoming overtly self-conscious and stymied by some of the issues raised above. I was most fortunate to get to know a remarkable Maya woman who confided in me and who shared with me, as our relationship evolved, memories that scarred her life. What follows, then, is someone else’s story narrated by me, in which I cannot deny imbalances of privilege and power but in which a very unusual field experience nagged at me to be told.

## At Peace in the Corn

“My grandmother says we did nothing wrong and so have nothing to hide. Use her real name, if you wish, and take a photograph of her. Tell people what happened to us.”

Paulino relayed the old lady=s words with no hint of emotion. His grandmother, Magdalena González, sat on a wooden bench weaving *trenzas*, narrow palm bands used in Guatemala to line the inside of hats. The fingers of her hands sped dexterously. One of Paulino=s daughters, Lucía, stuck as close to Doña Magdalena as the art of *trenza* production allowed. Though eighty years or more separated them, infant girl and family matriarch wore identical clothing: wrap-around skirts made of tie-dye fabric and cotton blouses whose rosy hue was set off smartly by embroidered collars. Two Maya women spanning four generations, they were a perfect match.

“Fine, then,” I said to Paulino. “Why don=t I start by taking some shots of your grandmother with her *trenzas*?” Paulino translated my Spanish into K=iche=. Doña Magdalena worked away, glancing up occasionally as I moved about the patio. All around me I could hear people engaged in household chores -- firewood being split, corn husked, clothes washed. Everyone was doing something, even little Lucía, arranging palm strands neatly in a row.

“I=d like some close-ups. Can you ask your grandmother to stop weaving and look directly at the camera?”

Paulino served as go-between once more. His grandmother laid down a *trenza* and gestured to Lucía, who slid along the wooden bench toward her, snuggling tight. Doña Magdalena stared at me, her eyes focused and unwavering, her gaze penetrating the lens

in such a way that I knew I had a photograph I could use. I clicked the shutter and signaled my thanks.

“Let your grandmother know that when I write about your family next time, I will do as she agrees. I won’t make up a name for her. She’ll be herself.”

Paulino nodded. I gathered up my equipment and made my way back to the jeep. Doña Magdalena stood watching from the entrance to the family compound, to where she’d hobbled with the help of her walking stick. Paulino’s wife, María, managed to wave goodbye even with a baby in her arms. She would give birth to another by the time I was able to return.

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The story of Doña Magdalena is the story of untold thousands of indigenous Guatemalans. Born and raised in the highlands around Santa Cruz del Quiché, she married in the 1930s while still in her teens, moving from her home in San Sebastián to her husband’s in San José, a few kilometers away. Poor even by local standards as they started out, the young couple saw their situation improve over the years when, instead of giving birth to six or eight or ten children, Doña Magdalena only had one.

Diego was Doña Magdalena’s pride and joy. Seeing how hard his mother and father worked, and with no other siblings to compete for their attention, Diego knew he was far more fortunate than other children in San José. Shipped off to school each day in Santa Cruz and growing up in a household where the needs of a mere three people had to be satisfied, much was expected of him. Favorable family circumstances never spoiled him. He learned to read and write, but not at the expense of knowing how to work the

land, for Diego became a good farmer who well understood that the ten acres his parents had sweated to own was an asset not to be squandered. In the 1960s he got involved with Catholic Action, whose development initiatives he was able to channel to the betterment of San José. A school got built, running water installed, and a road constructed that linked San José more conveniently to Santa Cruz. After the earthquake struck in 1976, Diego rallied the villagers and coordinated efforts to restore their ruined church. He emerged as a community leader, respected by most but not by all, for there were some in San José jealous of Diego's success, scornful of his industry and energetic ways.

The children that his parents never had Diego had for them, four boys and three girls. Feeding more mouths taxed family resources, but Diego labored to ensure that his offspring had the same opportunities he had received, the rudiments of an education foremost of all. What a family of three once enjoyed now had to be shared among eleven. Survival, not prosperity, was the goal. With Diego at the helm there was enough to make ends meet until the repression hit.

His social conscience and concern for the community made him an easy target. In the fear-filled years of the 1980s, Diego's "Catholic Action" was construed as "communist subversion" by neighbors who did not like him. Rumors began to circulate, fueled by the bitterness of envy. During the worst of the killings, in 1981 and 1982, Diego thought it best to leave San José and hide out in Guatemala City. He was in the capital when word reached him that the civil defense patrol in San José had murdered his father for refusing to reveal Diego's whereabouts. When Diego returned home to deal with the matter, the civil defense patrol pounced and killed him too. Doña Magdalena and

Diego's wife were widows, his seven children -- Paulino, the second oldest, was barely eleven at the time -- without a father. They were victims of a civil war perpetrated in the guise of anti-communism, a civil war in which unarmed civilians like Diego and his father were the bulk of a quarter-million casualties. It would be a decade before Doña Magdalena summoned the resolve to tell her story.

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I got to know Doña Magdalena while working with colleagues on a documentary film serie about countries in crisis, for which Guatemala was chosen as a pilot study. By the time we first met, Paulino had assumed the role of bread winner, staying on in San José to look after his grandmother as he and María started a family of their own. In 1995, I published a book with a version of the events that had so affected Doña Magdalena and her grandchildren, believing it prudent not to disclose her true identity. After a peace accord was signed in 1996 by the Guatemalan government and guerrilla forces that had fought for 36 years to change a brutal social order, human rights initiatives launched by the Catholic Church and the United Nations encouraged people to speak out, even if no guarantees could be made for their safety. It was then that I contacted Paulino, to see if he would talk with his grandmother and seek her approval for me to narrate what took place in San José without resorting to pseudonyms. My desire to include photographs of key protagonists in a new edition of my book made the use of pseudonyms redundant. Agreement on both counts enabled me to feature Doña Magdalena under her own name (Lovell [1995] 2010).

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I traveled to San José a week before Christmas, reflecting en route that no season of goodwill ever prevailed in Guatemala. The signing of the peace accord marked a formal end to hostilities, but terror lurked and violence still flared up. Bishop Juan Gerardi, who headed the Catholic Church=s investigation into the causes and consequences of conflict, had been beaten to death two days after he presented a report that attributed the majority of killings during the war to the national armed forces, with civil defense patrols organized and controlled by the military also implicated. If a high-profile figure like Gerardi could be eliminated and his assassins allowed to elude justice, then ordinary citizens like Doña Magdalena had to be wary. In San José, I learned later, members of the civil defense patrol, the very men responsible for the deaths of Doña Magdalena=s husband and son, were not only at large but held positions of authority, placed in charge of community projects that Diego once had supervised.

Arriving unannounced, I walked along the trail that led from the school toward the family compound. A dog barked as I drew near. Two children peered from behind a line of washing to see who was approaching. I recognized little Lucía, who had not grown by much in over a year. She ran to fetch her father. Paulino wiped some dirt from his hand before he extended it in welcome.

*“Buenos días, Jorge. You=ve come back to visit us. We wondered when you would.”*

He invited me to sit down and offered me a cup of *atol*, a hot drink made of cornmeal and spiced with peppers. I sipped it while saying hello to family of all ages who joined us in the patio. Out of a room adjacent to the compound entrance stepped Doña

Magdalena, not looking any older than when I last saw her but limping more noticeably. Paulino helped her to a chair. I smiled at her as she made herself comfortable. Doña Magdalena smiled back.

“I have a present for you.”

Paulino translated as I handed her a gift.

“These are for you to share among the children,” I said to Paulino.

The bag he took from me I had filled with crayons, notepads, candy, and chewing gum. A couple of youngsters rushed to Paulino. Doña Magdalena, meanwhile, held the small package as if she didn’t quite know what to do, looking at it quizzically until Paulino’s wife helped her undo the wrapping.

“It’s a book. A book with photographs for you to look at,” I said.

Since neither woman could read, and certainly not in English, I took the book and opened it at the section containing photographs. I pointed to the image on the upper right of the first page.

“*Es la abuela!*” Paulino’s wife exclaimed. “*Es la abuela con Lucía!*”

The youngsters dipping their hands into the bag I’d given Paulino scurried to their mother’s side to see for themselves. Their shouts brought more children gathering around. Doña Magdalena joined in with her own cries. Then she fell quiet, examined the photograph below the one of herself and Lucía, and let out the loudest cry of all.

“What’s she saying?” I asked Paulino.

Beneath the image of Doña Magdalena and her great-granddaughter was a photograph of Rigoberta Menchú. It was Menchú's testimony, before any fact-finding missions were feasible and revelations about atrocities widely known, that alerted the outside world to the horrors of civil war in Guatemala. Doña Magdalena brandished the book over the head.

"I won't be as famous," she declared in a voice tinged with sadness. "But people will see me in a book with Rigoberta Menchú and know that we share the same experiences."

~ X ~

When I visited San José two years later I found out from the woman who tends the village store that Doña Magdalena had died. The storekeeper had watched me park the jeep and thought to tell me before I took the path to the family compound. I thanked her and cursed myself for not having made the trip sooner.

I walked to the family compound, which was eerily empty. Not even a dog barked in warning. I called aloud several times but nobody replied. A radio had been left on. The drone of *marimba* music was a fitting lament.

Knowing that children were still in school -- I had heard a class chant a multiplication table as I walked past -- I returned to wait in the playground. During recess I asked a teacher if he could help me identify one of Paulino's boys or girls. "I've been out to the house," I explained, "but no one's home. I'd like to pay my respects. Someone in the family I knew is dead."

The teacher helped me locate the eldest of Paulino=s daughters, who recognized me.

“My father is working in Santa Cruz and won=t be back until dark. My mother is at my aunt=s. I=ll get her for you.”

The girl crossed the playground to a house that lay behind the village store. I followed her. Paulino=s wife, María, appeared and greeted me.

“I=m sorry to hear about Doña Magdalena,” I said. “I understand that Paulino won=t be back until later this evening. Would it be possible for you to take me to see her grave?”

María agreed. She led me to a plot of ground two kilometers away. The family had buried Doña Magdalena not in the local cemetery, where the killers of her husband and her son one day would be, but in a clearing we walked to through fields of towering corn.

A wooden cross, painted red, distinguishes Doña Magdalena=s grave from a handful of others. María approached and stood over it. A baby peered out from the shawl tied to her back. A barefoot toddler held on to her mother=s skirt. Laid to rest in a clearing by a cornfield, Doña Magdalena=s struggle is over.

We returned in silence to San José. The school that Diego helped to build was emptying out. Hordes of children ran and yelled and larked about, several of Paulino and María=s among them. The sight of so much life cheered me up.

When it was time for me to leave, María asked if she could have a copy of my book. Fortunately, I'd thought to bring one with me. "Here you are, María. But remember, I left a book with Doña Magdalena when I passed through a couple of visits ago. We all admired the photograph of her, sitting next to one of your little girls."

María looked at me and said, *"El libro está en la caja, Jorge. Está en la caja con la abuela."*

The family had buried Doña Magdalena with the book.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Parts of this contribution have appeared, in substantially different form and context, in the *Journal of Historical Geography* 16(3) 1990, pp. 277-84 and *Gender, Place, and Culture* 15(1) 2008, pp. 75-81. The opportunity to revisit my thoughts for this publication is much appreciated. I thank Victoria Henderson and Madelaine Jacobs for putting together power-point versions for oral delivery, and Gesa Mackenthun for the invitation to attend and present at the symposium on “Embodiments of Cultural Encounters” convened at Rostock, Germany, September 24-27, 2009. The archival and field research upon which my contribution is based was made possible by the financial support of the Social Sciences and Research Council of Canada. Even though she’s gone, Doña Magdalena still hovers around the family compound, where I am always made welcome whenever I visit. The journey there I share now in memory of Finola Shankar, who I trust is also at peace in the corn.

## NOTES

(1) See Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity; Spaces of Control; The New Imperialism*; and *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

(2) All direct quotes may be found, in the Spanish original, in the Archivo General de Indias (hereafter AGI), Audiencia de Guatemala (hereafter AG) 168, cited parenthetically henceforth. These extracts have been rendered into English with the assistance of the late Anthony Higgins, who as a graduate student at Queen’s University in the late 1980s helped me make better sense of the documentation at hand than I was able to on my own. The Franciscan viewpoint is articulated in a letter to the Crown dated January 1, 1556 (AGI, AG 168). Alonso de Zorita ([1563] 1970), a remarkable ethnographer as well as a distinguished civil servant, is afforded extended, more balanced scrutiny in the biography of him written by Ralph Vigil (1987).

(3) Fray Juan de Torres to the Crown, November 11, 1555 (AGI, AG 168).

(4) Fray Tomás de Cárdenas and Fray Juan de Torres to the Crown, December 6, 1555 (AGI, AG 168).

(5) Ibid.

(6) Kafka's words serve Josef Skvorecky as his epigraph to *Dvorak in Love* (1986), a novel that the Czech writer, a long-time exile in Canada, himself describes as "a light-hearted dream." Kafka's maxim fits the contents of the Seville archive discussed here perfectly, even if Skvorecky's description of his novel does not. There is nothing "light-hearted" about how Maya peoples in Guatemala have been treated, from the sixteenth century on, by Spaniards and their criollo descendents, as a reading of Severo Martínez Peláez ([1970] 2009) makes abundantly clear.

(7) See, as part of a now voluminous literature, Marcus and Fischer's *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* and Duncan and Ley's *Place/Culture/Representation*.

(8) Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 130-132 and 148-149.

(9) Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 1.

(10) Lovell and Lutz, "The Primacy of Larger Truths," 195.

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