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At a Glance...

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At a Glance...

Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."



Photography by Jonathan Moller

Above: Three women, themselves survivors of the violence, watch as the remains of relatives and friends who were killed in the early 1980's are exhumed. Nebaj, 2000.

AT A GLANCE...

PHOTOGRAPHY AND EXCERPTS FROM TWO TRAVELING EXHIBITIONS

Our Culture is Our Resistance: Repression, Refuge and Healing in Guatemala & Refugees Even After Death: A Quest for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation

Between 1993 and 2001 I worked as a human rights advocate and free-lance photographer in Guatemala, principally working with indigenous Mayans uprooted by that country's long and brutal civil war. I spent much of my time in rural areas, working to support Guatemala's displaced and refugee populations in their struggle for respect of their basic rights. Most recently I worked with a forensic anthropology team, documenting the exhumations of clandestine cemeteries. These are stories of life and death, of hope and despair, and of struggles for survival, respect, and truth.

My work focuses primarily on the Communities of Population in Resistance (CPRs) - beginning with photographs taken between 1993 and 1995 in northern Guatemala. The CPRs were born out of the violent repression directed against the civilian population by the Guatemalan army in the early 1980's. While tens of thousands of indigenous *campesinos* spilled across the border into Mexico, the people who would form the CPRs fled to remote mountain and jungle areas, where they formed highly organized, self-governing communities that silently resisted death and army control, remaining in hiding until the mid 1990's. During this fifteen-year period, they were accused by the government of being guerrillas, and were hunted by the army.

After the signing of a final Peace Accord in late 1996, ending Guatemala's 36-year civil war, entire communities of the CPRs began to come down from their mountain and jungle refuges to resettle on new lands, having negotiated property rights with the government, or purchased the lands with support from Catholic charities. In 2000, I began to visit these recently settled CPR communities, and to photograph the people in their new, tenuous circumstances.

Guatemala's civil war led to the death and disappearance of over 200,000 civilians and created hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people. By the army's own admission, over 450 villages were completely wiped off the map during its five-year *scorched earth* campaign (1979 - 1984). Massacres of women, children, and the elderly occurred on a regular basis. The UN-sponsored Truth Commission concluded that the United States trained, aided, and otherwise supported the Guatemalan military in its genocidal counterinsurgency campaigns against indigenous populations. Now, more than seven years after the signing of the Peace Accords, the country continues to experience a culture of impunity, violence, poverty and exclusion.

Within the context of a country on the path to peace, survivors of the war, including the CPRs, want to search for and reclaim the remains of their loved ones who were massacred or disappeared. The exhumations allow the survivors to begin healing, giving them the opportunity to expose the truth of what happened, and in some cases to seek justice. These images only begin to tell the story of the repression and unspeakable violence suffered by the majority of indigenous Guatemalans.

Eleven years ago, in those profoundly beautiful mountains and jungles, I married my passions for photography and social justice. It is my hope that in some way this work speaks to my vision as an artist and an activist, and most especially to the lives of those in Guatemala that survived and resisted death and exploitation, and who continue to struggle for their land, their basic rights, and their culture.

Jonathan Moller



Left image: Esteban stands in front of the clinic with his sick daughter, Laura. Behind him is a political campaign poster from the 1999 presidential elections. Some 300 families of the CPR-Ixcán resettled in this community that they named Primavera del Ixcán after they left their jungle hiding places in late 1996. Ixcán municipality, Quiché, 2000.

Right image: These women and others sweep the community every two weeks. Ninety-two families of the Popular Communities in Resistance of the Petén left their jungle-hiding place and moved to these lands in late 1998 after negotiating their resettlement with the government. Salvador Fajardo Community, Finca Santa Rita, La Libertad municipality, Petén Department.





Above: The remains of a man and a woman, their daughter in law, and their grandchild. When I took this photograph, the remains of the three others from the same family had already been lifted from the top. Nebaj, Quiché, 2000.

Victims and Witnesses

It is said that the bones of the dead tell no lies. In many cases, they speak on their own behalf, telling stories of pain, violence and abuse. In Guatemala, every clandestine cemetery that is found, every bone that is recovered from Mother Earth speaks of the people who were annihilated, of the homes burned, of the indiscriminate massacres. In short, they speak of the crimes against humanity, of the genocide committed by the Army against the indigenous population.

Jonathan Moller's photographs speak of this. But they also show another face, the face of life, hope, redemption, and demands for change. The Communities of Population in Resistance offered a challenge to the established order, to *de facto* violence, and to state terrorism. Not only were they survivors, they also organized to reject what the perpetrators represented: death, violence, humiliation and inhumanity. That's why they were persecuted: for

conquering death and for telling their story, a story that also belongs to the Guatemalan people, a story that speaks of the struggle for justice, peace, dignity and better living conditions.

The CPRs are an example of a brave effort at community organization, of peaceful existence and harmony with nature. They were the conscience and witness of a people descended from one of the greatest and most spiritual human civilizations that has borne the marks of suffering and repression.

These images both denounce and give a message of life. They inform while capturing the beauty of a passing moment that is fixed in memory.

Each moment captured by Jonathan Moller's camera passes into eternity, yet also gives encouragement for the future. Each moment sets an example for future generations, so that they may

know the past, which is filled with darkness but also contains hope, struggle and optimism. Hope is seen in people's labor, in children's faces, and in the construction of a better life for all.

To ensure that the genocide will never be forgotten and that the perpetrators be brought to judgment and punished some day, the content of this book becomes a chapter in the collective memory of a history that has been officially denied. In the official chronicles, the events captured by Jonathan Moller's camera never occurred. There was no scorched earth, no massacres, no body dumps, and no genocide.

But the bones of the dead prove the opposite. The bones of the dead don't lie.

Rigoberta Menchú Tum
Noble Peace Laureate, 1992

Testimony

We were on a hillside in Sumal Grande. We thought it was safe, but the soldiers were right there on the hill that day. Before we realized it, they started to shoot at us. I was with my cousin at a different location, and there wasn't time for us to cross over to where our family was. We had to escape in a different direction.

They captured my wife, my son, my grandfather, my uncle and his wife, and others. It was April 12th, 1983, when they captured them and took them down to a village and killed them there.

Three days later we asked some men if they had seen our families, and they said,

"Yes, we just saw some dead people. The army killed them and left them half buried, and now the dogs are digging them out." And they took us there, and we found the scraps of clothes that the dogs had dug out of the ground, and we confirmed that, yes, it was them.

We weren't able to dig a deeper grave to leave them in, so we just put some stones and branches on top so that the dogs wouldn't keep digging them up.

It was a difficult time for me and my other brothers because we were completely alone. It was a time of sadness, of confusion, and we didn't know what to do. I was in complete

despair. I was sad because I saw the scraps of clothing that belonged to my son, my wife, and my family. My grief gave me no peace.

Marcos

formerly of the CPR Sierra

Below: A prayer at the gravesite of a man killed and buried here by the guerillas in 1983. According to his wife, he had refused to support the guerillas in any way. After he had turned himself in to the army to live in a "model village," he returned to his community to get his family. On his first night back, guerillas surrounded the house and took him to a cornfield in a neighboring community where they killed him. Nebaj, Quiché, Guatemala, 2000.

About the Author

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1963, Jonathan Moller, a photographer and human right activist, has had his photography tour the United States, Europe and Mexico. He studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Tufts University in 1990. He has spent seven of the past thirteen years in Central America, beginning in 1991 when he worked in Nicaragua with a group of exiled Salvadorans from *Radio Venceremos* to create the traveling exhibition *El Salvador in the Eye of the Beholder*. Since then Moller has lived primarily in Guatemala, where in 1993, he began work with a human rights organization supporting populations uprooted by the civil war. For six months in 2000-2001, he was staff photographer on a Guatemalan forensic anthropology team documenting exhumations of clandestine cemeteries. As a member of the Foreign Press Club of Guatemala, since 1994 Moller has also worked as a part-time freelance photographer in Guatemala and El Salvador. His photographs have been widely exhibited, have been published in numerous magazines and books in North and Central America, and he has been a member of Impact Visuals, Swanstock, and Getty Images.

Moller's upcoming book, *Our Culture is Our Resistance: Repression, Refuge and Healing in Guatemala*, will be published by PowerHouse Books in the Fall 2004. It will include a preface by Rigoberta Menchú Tum and essays by Francisco Goldman, Ricardo Falla and Susanne Jonas. Prose and poetry by Eduardo Galeano, Julia Esquivel, Humberto Ak'Abal, Francisco Morales Santos and Heather Dean. It will also have testimonies by survivors of Guatemala's brutal civil war. Partial proceeds from the sale of this book will go to the Association for Justice and Reconciliation in Guatemala. For more information please contact the photographer/author at jonas@igc.org.

