

Spring 2008

## Rhetorical Witnessing: Recognizing Genocide in Guatemala

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### Recommended Citation

Flynn, Elizabeth A., and R. Wolf. "Rhetorical Witnessing: Recognizing Genocide in Guatemala." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2008, pp. 23–44, doi:10.25148/clj.2.2.009490.

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## Rhetorical Witnessing: Recognizing Genocide in Guatemala

Elizabeth A. Flynn and  
Rüdiger Escobar Wolf

The article explores the rhetorical dimensions of witnessing. We concentrate, in particular, on two groups: 1) university students at the University of San Carlos, Quetzaltenango, whose murals are dramatic reminders of the massacres that resulted in the deaths of over 200,000 indigenous people in the 1980s and early 90s and of the corrupt governmental leaders responsible for them, and 2) U.S. companions sponsored by an organization within our own community, the Copper Country Guatemala Accompaniment Project (CCGAP).

Much colonial theory attempts to characterize colonized and colonizers, often with emphasis on the complex situation of the native intellectual who arises from the colonized but has been educated by the colonizers and must attempt to navigate the worlds of both groups. In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, for instance, Albert Memmi makes evident the complexities of his own situation as both a colonized Tunisian and a philosopher educated at the Sorbonne. He says in his preface, “I undertook this inventory of conditions of colonized people mainly in order to understand myself and to identify my place in the society of other men [sic]” (viii). His subsequent portrait of the difficulties of the colonized explores the temptation to assimilate to the culture of the colonized with its resulting shame and self-hate (121). Memmi says, “a man [sic] straddling two cultures is rarely well seated” (124). He also speaks of the “doubts” of the colonized (127). The process of escaping the position of the colonized involves attempting to recover an “autonomous and separate destiny” by returning to the language and culture of the colonized and attempting to rebuild them (135).

Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* identifies three phases that many native intellectuals go through. They first assimilate to the occupying power, then they immerse themselves in their own culture. Finally, they develop what Fanon calls a “fighting literature,” a “revolutionary literature” (222-3). He says, “the first duty of the native poet is to see clearly the people he has chosen as the subject of his work of art” (226). For Fanon, “To fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation, that material keystone which makes the building of a culture possible” (234).

As these discussions of the situation of the native intellectual indicate, both Memmi and Fanon move beyond binary conceptions of colonized and colonizers. Memmi depicts colonizers who accept colonization and colonizers who refuse it, for instance, and he describes the often contradictory positions of colonized people. Both Memmi and Fanon are writing, however, in the midst of the mid-twentieth-century Algerian Revolution, a struggle that perhaps made inevitable a perspective focused exclusively on generalized examinations of colonized and colonizers within the context of Algeria. In his introduction to his twenty-first-century work *Decolonization and the Decolonized*, however, Memmi writes from quite a different vantage point and recognizes that every situation is unique (xi). The example he uses is that of Latin America where decolonization took place at the beginning of the nineteenth century so that at the present the inhabitants are largely of mixed race and often descendants of the colonizers (xii).

Although Memmi and Fanon focus on the native intellectual, e.g., on the colonized who has been educated by the colonizer, native intellectuals are not the only intellectuals who have participated actively and productively in colonial struggles. Intellectuals from colonizing countries, for instance, have often played an important role, as Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* and his introduction to *The Colonizer and the Colonized* make evident. Also, the role of the intellectual shifts as colonial situations become postcolonial. As Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* makes clear, postcolonialism is often characterized not by revolutionary struggle but by migration, what he calls "the diaspora of exile" (19). The native intellectual, then, often shifts attention from revolution to themes of displacement and border conditions. The work of Bhabha, who is himself a native intellectual, is a good example of this shift of attention, as is the work of V.S. Naipaul, Gayatri Spivak, and numerous others.

Here we focus on a particular kind of postcolonial intellectual, the witness. Witnesses may not themselves have participated in struggles against repressive governments and may not be native intellectuals, but they bear witness to the suffering of victims of colonial brutality and commemorate the dead. We will concentrate, in particular, on two groups: 1) university students at the University of San Carlos, Quetzaltenango, whose murals are dramatic reminders of the massacres that resulted in the deaths of over 200,000 indigenous people in the 1980s and early 90s and of the corrupt governmental leaders responsible for them and 2) U.S. companions sponsored by an organization within my own community, the Copper Country Guatemala Accompaniment Project (CCGAP). Companions are individuals from the United States, Canada, or Europe who go to Guatemala for a time to assist communities that were displaced by the massacres perpetrated by military regimes to attempt to prevent future harm. CCGAP describes its mission in its 2005 brochure as promoting "human rights by responding to requests for international accompaniment from Guatemalan organizations and/or communities, and also by increasing awareness of Guatemala in the Copper Country area of Michigan." Before discussing these different forms

of witnessing, however, we will examine the situation of the postcolonial intellectual more fully and explore what rhetorical witnessing can mean.

## Postcolonial Intellectuals

Numerous postcolonial intellectuals, both native and non-native, have reflected on and intervened in problems in the aftermath of revolutionary struggles. Often, they bring a critical distance and a broad perspective to their work. Critical theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, for instance, write not as individuals caught up in revolutionary struggle but from the more detached vantage point of the mid-1980s. They also write from a European base despite Laclau's Argentinian origins. In their introduction, for instance, they speak not of a single struggle but of an "avalanche of historical mutations" that challenge classical forms of analysis. Some of these struggles include Budapest, Prague, Poland, Kabul, Vietnam, and Cambodia, all of which they see as challenging the foundations on which leftist thought has been based (1). They also mention a number of movements that have arisen since the development of classic Leftist theory which call for theoretical reconsideration, including feminism; the protest movements of ethnic, national, and sexual minorities; anti-institutional ecology struggles; the anti-nuclear movement; and social struggle in countries on the capitalist periphery (1). They say,

What is now in crisis is a whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital "i," as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another, and upon the illusory prospect of a perfectly unitary and homogenous collective will that will render pointless the moment of politics (2).

In this postcolonial moment, Laclau and Mouffe alter classical Marxist analysis with its rationalism and classicism and develop a poststructuralist and post-Marxist form of analysis that is contingent rather than universal, that recognizes the specificity of contemporary social struggles, and that does not depend on identity politics (3). They do so by focusing on a conception of hegemony that "goes far beyond Gramsci" in that theirs attempts to outline a new project based on radical democracy (3). They conceive of the worker, for instance, as no longer simply proletarian but also occupying a plurality of positions that are not united by a law of progress.

Relations between these positions, therefore, become "an open articulation which offers no *a priori* guarantee that it will adopt a given form" (36). Drawing on Hegel, they speak of identity in terms of transition, relation, and difference (95). They define articulation as "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (104) and discourse as "the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice" (105). Further, in opposition to the perspective of Michel Foucault, they make no distinction between discursive and non-

discursive practices (107). They also emphasize that resistance to powerful structures depends on alliances and coalitions (152). What is needed is collective action and multiple forms of resistance (153). In an interview with Lynn Worsham and Gary Olson, Mouffe describes intellectuals as “the ones who elaborate and provide the vocabularies that then can be appropriated by people in order to give some thought to their experience so that they can transform their relations of subordination and oppression” (180). Mouffe rejects the idea of a politics rooted in static conceptions of identity and calls for a “chain of equivalence among different struggles” (186). Although Laclau and Mouffe do not write about witnessing per se, they prepare the way for such an investigation by modeling and theorizing the valuable role that can be played in colonial and postcolonial struggles by intellectuals who are detached in various ways from revolutionary struggles themselves.

### Rhetorical Witnessing and Recognizing

Witnesses, as we use the term here, take a public stand in defense of the defenseless. In the context of Guatemala, they call attention to atrocities committed by the Guatemalan government against its citizens, especially indigenous populations, and attempt to persuade others to take up their cause. In the situations we describe here, those rhetorical stands are visual in the case of the Guatemalan university students and written in the case of the CCGAP accompaniers. These rhetors make public statements in an attempt to enable others see, remember, and defend victims of violence. Although rhetorical witnessing is most obviously associated with visual rhetoric, it can also be seen as a kind of “rhetorical listening,” described by Krista Ratcliffe as a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture (1). It often involves breaking a silence, moving from silence to speech, as Cheryl Glenn describes in her chapter on “Witnessing Silence” in *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. It is also a form of resistance and is similar in some ways to strategic resistance, as Flynn discusses in her essay “Strategic, Counter-Strategic, and Reactive Resistance in the Feminist Classroom.” Donna Haraway in *Modest Witness* portrays the witness as someone who sees, attests, and stands publicly accountable for and psychically vulnerable to “one’s visions and representations” (267). For Haraway, witnessing is a collective practice and is not mere watching (267).

Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* aims to develop what she calls an “ethics of witnessing” (6). Although the context within which she is working is very different from that of Haraway, she, too, sees that witnesses have responsibilities and are not mere observers; they speak out against oppression and subordination. They provide testimonies and take responsibility for others (10). Oliver sees subjectivity as founded on the activity of witnessing, on “the ability to respond to, and address, others” (15). She finds that witnessing includes both the juridical connotation of “seeing with one’s own eyes” and the religious connotation of testifying to that which cannot be seen, to “bearing witness” (16). For Oliver, witnessing is seeing,

attesting, standing publicly accountable for, and psychically vulnerable to, one's visions and representations.

Oliver finds that ethics is possible only “beyond recognition,” hence the subtitle of her book (106). She explains that we are obligated to respond to what is beyond our comprehension and hence beyond our recognition. She takes issue with the approaches to recognition of philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, Judith Butler, and Julia Kristeva, whom she sees as either defining recognition narrowly as understanding and passing judgment on others or as working from a logic of repudiation or exclusion (106). For Oliver, to recognize others requires acknowledging that their experiences may be incomprehensible to us (106). We use recognizing in this sense. Witnesses make visible the experiences of others despite the fact that they themselves have not necessarily shared those experiences and so may not fully comprehend them. They grant those experiences their approval and make them visible to others despite their distance from the experiences and the limitations of their experiential knowledge of what actually occurred.

A good example of a rhetor and witness who recognizes in the sense of acknowledging rather than in the sense of fully comprehending is Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, the researcher who made possible Rigoberta Menchú's Nobel Prize-winning testimonial, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. Burgos-Debray describes the process that resulted in the book in her introduction. She speaks of Menchú as a “privileged witness,” an individual who participated in and survived the genocide described in the book. Burgos-Debray says, “She refuses to let us forget” (xi). It is Burgos-Debray herself who is the witness as we are defining it here, however. She is the “unprivileged” witness. She did not participate in the events and learned of them only through conversations with the twenty-three-year-old Menchú, who spent a week with Burgos-Debray at her home in Paris and spoke to her in Spanish, a language Menchú had not fully mastered. Burgos-Debray constructed the book on the basis of twenty-four hours of conversation on tape. She says,

For the whole of that week, I lived in Rigoberta's world.  
We practically cut ourselves off from the outside world.  
We established an excellent rapport immediately and, as  
the days passed and as she confided in me and told me  
the story of her life, her family and her community, our  
relationship gradually became more intense. As time went  
by, she became more self-assured and even began to seem  
contented (xv).

Burgos-Debray did not experience the genocide Menchú speaks of first hand and had the challenging task of creating a narrative out of taped conversation fragments recounted by a non-native speaker of Spanish. There were experience barriers and language barriers, and her knowledge of what occurred was limited to the taped information. Since there are inaccuracies in the book (D'Sousa, Stoll), it seems likely that Burgos-Debray at times misunderstood Menchú and hence misrepresented some of the information

Menchú shared with her. She recognized Menchú by writing the book from Menchú's perspective and by making Menchú's situation and the situation of indigenous people in Guatemala visible to the rest of the world. Before providing rhetorical analyses of the student murals and the companions' letters, we will provide a brief history of events that gave rise to Menchú's book and to subsequent events that are the subject of the witnessing of the groups we will focus on here.

## Genocide in Guatemala

The situation in Guatemala is somewhat different from the situation in Latin America that Memmi describes in *Decolonization and Decolonized*. Decolonization from Spain did take place in the early nineteenth century, and large numbers of inhabitants of mixed race, descendants of the colonizers, did populate the cities of Guatemala. A difference from Memmi's representation, however, is that large numbers of indigenous peoples continue to inhabit rural areas of Guatemala and to be colonized by Guatemalan military governments that, in the later part of the twentieth century, became increasingly repressive and brutal. These governments have often been supported by the United States, resulting in both economic and political exploitation and oppression in Guatemala.

As Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer in *Bitter Fruit* explain, Guatemala was liberated from the colonial power of Spain in 1821. It was subsequently ruled by a small aristocracy for over one hundred years. In the spring of 1944, in the waning months of World War II, a growing body of school teachers, shopkeepers, skilled workers, and students staged public demonstrations demanding freedom to organize. The result was the overthrow

**Although the Peace Accords brought the killings to an end, students at the university and the university itself remain resistant to subsequent regimes that continue traditions of corruption and repression.**

of the fourteen-year dictatorship of General Jorge Ubico and the election, in what is called the October Revolution, of Dr. Juan José Arévalo Bermajo as president. Under the new constitution, individual rights were guaranteed, and the Jeffersonian principle of

popular sovereignty was dominant (33). In 1951 he was succeeded by Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. Arévalo had introduced democracy; Arbenz's task was to alter existing economic structures (49). In 1950, the annual per capita income of agricultural workers was \$87, and 2.2 percent of the landowners, the largest of which was the U.S. company, the United Fruit Company, owned 70 percent of the nation's arable land (50). Arbenz's goal was to free Guatemala economically from dependence on U.S. corporations (53). However, this was not to be. In 1954, in a coup backed by the United States government, Arbenz was deposed. The rationalization for the U.S. intervention was Arbenz's

socialist leanings and the threat of a communist takeover of Latin America. What was actually at stake, of course, were the economic interests of large U.S. corporations.

The report of a Recovery of Historical Memory Project, *Guatemala Never Again!*, states that since 1954, regimes dominated by the military were responsible for murders, kidnapping, massacres, forced disappearance, and torture until the Peace Accords in 1996 (304). According to Paul Kobrak in *Organizing and Repression in the University of San Carlos, Guatemala, 1944 to 1996*, 492 of those killed were university students or faculty (6). Although the Peace Accords brought the killings to an end, students at the university and the university itself remain resistant to subsequent regimes that continue traditions of corruption and repression.

Schlesinger and Kinzer, and numerous others, argue that the destabilization of the Guatemalan government brought about by deposing Arbenz in 1954 through intervention by the United States resulted in reigns of terror by numerous military regimes for the next four decades. This led to the deaths of tens of thousands of citizens including Mayan Indians, liberal Ladinos, labor organizers, and middle-class university faculty and students. The testimonial of Rigoberta Menchú captures the essence of the life of fear and abjection of resistant indigenous farmers and their families who were almost always seasonal migrant workers on the *fincas*, or plantations. In one graphic description she says,

[T]here was a massacre of 106 peasants in Panzós, an area of Cobán. It was the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, 1978. Panzós is a town where they discovered oil and began throwing peasants off their land. But since the peasants didn't know where to go, they all came down in an organized fashion with their leaders. They were Kekchi Indians and the army massacred them as if they were killing birds—men, women and children died. Blood ran in the main square of Panzós (160).

Although some of the students at the University of San Carlos, Guatemala City, sided with the repressive right-wing governments, most sided with the guerillas, those engaged in active combat against the government, and were overtly oppositional. Some students, in fact, left campus on weekends and joined the guerilla forces in the mountains. At the height of the repression in 1980, 125 students and faculty of the university had disappeared or were killed. The violence continued until the signing of the peace accords in 1996.

Student resistance at the university needs to be understood within the context of what Kobrak calls the principle of “university autonomy.” He explains that in Latin America, the concept of university autonomy emerged at a continent-wide student congress held in Córdoba, Argentina, in 1918. The University of San Carlos, according to Kobrak, has organizational autonomy, financial autonomy, academic autonomy over its program of study, and an administrative autonomy that allows the university to elect its own authorities



and independently hire and fire its faculty. A consequence of the principle of autonomy is that the state's security forces cannot legally enter the university without invitation, though illegal incursions were a frequent occurrence after 1970 (14). The university, then, provided the intellectual and organizational base for the country's mass opposition movement and at times for the guerilla movement as well. Unable to withhold funding from the university or to hire or fire faculty, the government has exercised its power over the university by means of threat, kidnapping, torture, and assassination (15). The state-sanctioned death squads, for example, used to leave the mutilated bodies of their victims in the principal entrances of the university campus.

More recently, there have been attempts to bring those responsible for the massacres to justice. One of the CCGAP accompaniers, Kimberly Kern, describes this stage of the process in a letter dated March 2007:

A civil war ravaged this country for 36 years which ended with the peace accords in 1996 and more than 200,000 civilians dead. 90% of the casualties were at the hands of the U.S.-backed Guatemalan army under the auspices of fighting "communism." In 2000 and 2001, a courageous group of war survivors filed charges of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes against former military dictators Romeo Lucas Garcia and Efraim Rios Montt and their military high commands in the Guatemalan court system. Seven years later, these cases remain in the investigative phase due to a lack of political will to bring the accused to justice (Kern, "Letter").

The murals that we will discuss make reference to this recent history of attempting to bring governmental leaders to justice as well as to the massacres of the 80s. Their situation in the protected courtyard of the university is a result of the autonomy of the university referred to above. The walls of the courtyard of the University of San Carlos, Quetzaltenango, where the murals we will discuss were painted, surround a protected and enclosed space somewhat reminiscent of a religious cloister. The courtyard is a kind of sanctuary. It contains benches for rest and contemplation and numerous plants. Students feel free there to criticize the government and to remind others of its atrocities, though they are careful not to associate particular murals with individual students, signing them, instead, with the names of sponsoring groups or with pseudonyms.

### **Guatemalan Student Rhetorical Witnessing**

When Flynn first saw the murals on the walls of the university, she was struck by their size and the boldness of their anti-government sentiment. They are the first thing you notice when you enter the university courtyard. The work of amateurs rather than professionals, they are created spontaneously with only minimal coordination or official authorization. Some of the student murals that we discuss depict *huelgueros*, students who participate

in the annual “Huelga de Dolores,” which might be translated as “Strike of Suffering,” a Guatemalan tradition in which, once a year, around Easter, hooded university students—whose costumes resemble those of participants in Good Friday processions—march in the streets, shout bawdy chants, and ridicule the government (Kobrak 29). On April 12, 1962, however, the festive spirit of the march came to an abrupt halt when military police ran down a student marcher, killing him instantly, and opened fire at the Law School’s main entrance. Two more students fell dead (Kobrak 29). The *huelgueros* are witnesses, reminding onlookers of the suffering experienced by indigenous peoples. They set themselves apart from ordinary citizens and take a public stand against the government, sometimes at the risk of their own lives. Their participation in the march is ceremonial, symbolic, synecdochic. They represent university students in general as well as the martyrs who have died at the hands of the government. The murals are a related oppositional tradition, an example of rhetorical witnessing.



We will focus on five murals. The first mural is a picture of Argentinean physician and revolutionary Che Guevara, inspiration for resistance movements throughout Latin America. Twenty-five-year-old Guevara came to Guatemala in January of 1954, attracted by the climate of social reform (Schlesinger and Kinzer 184). When the Arbenz regime began to falter, Guevara joined those attempting to defend him. The experience radicalized “el Che” and convinced him of the need for armed struggle (Schlesinger and Kinzer 184). At the bottom of the picture is a quote that can be translated as “The terror of the people has no other monument than the bones of its martyrs.” Guevara himself was one such martyr. Others are the indigenous

communities that were victims of genocide. Student identification with Guevara, the hero of Latin American resistance movements, is clear, as is identification with the victims of murdered indigenous peoples within their own country. The mural is signed by the group that is responsible for it. It reads, “Expression.”

The Guevara mural pays tribute to the symbolic leader of Latin American revolutions who inspired others to action and who participated in the Cuban struggle for independence. He is an actor or tragic hero whose status is the result of his past heroic actions, an example of what Kenneth Burke in *A Grammar of Motives* refers to as an “actus-status” alignment (42). His past actions have given him considerable status within the community of Guatemalan university students. The mural represents Guevara as larger than life. He is young, energetic, and in control. He becomes a model for students who are themselves engaged in struggles against oppression and who could themselves become martyrs. The portrait is reassuring to students who have placed themselves in opposition to their government. At the same time, it is a reminder of the high stakes associated with political resistance.



The former dictator E. Rios Montt is depicted in the second mural. He is standing on the back of a Guatemalan worker and pulling the strings of his puppet, President Alfonso Portillo. Rios Montt was not supposed to run for the 2000 elections because he had become president as a result of a coup, and the Guatemalan constitution does not permit individuals who came to power as a result of a coup to become president. He did run, however, because the law was written after his coup in 1982. Portillo is portrayed as a chicken

because his nickname was “pollo ronco,” “hoarse chicken,” for his hoarse-sounding voice. The names in the background are communities affected by the war. *Huelgueros* are pointing the finger of blame at the two politicians and carrying the torch for those who suffered at their hands. Surrounding the politicians are the names of the towns in which massacres occurred. The mural is cartoon-like with its caricature of Montt and Portillo and unequivocally condemnatory. It was painted by law school students in 2003.



Unlike Guevara’s commemorative and larger-than-life portrait, Rios Montt’s stature in this mural is greatly diminished through representations of his abuse of power by lording over workers and controlling Portillo as if he were a doll. Portillo’s stature is diminished through his association with a chicken and through his portrayal as a less-than-human puppet. Unlike Guevara, who is tragic, they are comic—contemptible rather than admirable. If a hero is virtuous, they are corrupt, overfed, laughable. They exploit workers, use their power arbitrarily, and are associated with brutal massacres. In terms of Burke’s actus-status ratio, their past actions are deplorable, their status as governmental leaders reduced to that of petty thieves and criminals. In contrast, the *huelgueros* are portrayed as human, responsible, and moral.

This attack upon government leaders is continued in the third mural through caricature. It depicts Francisco Reyes, vice president from 2000–2004, and Alfonso Portillo as thieves running away with sacks full of money but leaving their footprints behind. They, too, are cartoon-like and reduced in stature. Rather than responsible government leaders, they are petty thieves. They are being chased by the “*chalana*,” who is the personification of death and the

patron saint of the university students. The *chalanas*' examine the corruption of Reyes and Portillo through a magnifying glass. Once again, the massacres are invoked, this time through the reference to death. The mural was painted by the students of the School of Medicine in 2002. It was prophetic in that it was confirmed later that the Portillo and Reyes administration was corrupt.



A modified version of San Carlos University's coat of arms in Latin is depicted in the fourth mural. It means "The Carolinian University of Guatemala Distinguished among Those of the World." Inside the coat of arms, once again, are the *huelgueros* or strikers. This time the hooded students seem to represent the university itself. The painters of the mural have embedded themselves into the coat of arms, making them official and integral to the functioning of the university. At the bottom of the mural in red letters are names of places where massacres occurred. On the sides of the murals, though, in large black printing, are names in the indigenous language, Quiché, and are probably the names that the *huelgueros* adopt during the *Huelga*. This mural, then, is signed by individuals rather than a group, but their identities remain protected by their Quiché names.

In the fifth mural, *huelgueros* and workers demonstrate against the government. This time, though, the students are dressed in black and gray or white rather than red. The mural makes clear the alliance between students and workers. A *huelguero* stands at the center of the mural with a bird on its shoulder. The buzzard or vulture is the mascot of the *Huelga*. Names are painted on a post to the left of the representation of students and workers. They are not necessarily places where massacres occurred and may be places where the *huelgueros* are from. The *huelgueros* continue the work of Guevara. They are heroes who align themselves with workers and take action to resist a

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corrupt and brutal government. Their actions ennoble them, not as individuals but as a group. Whereas Guevara is depicted as having a distinctive face, they are faceless, disguised, protected by their threatening costumes.



The creators of the murals are witnesses who visibly recognize the sufferings of the indigenous people of Guatemala as a result of the massacres and assign blame. They see corrupt political leaders as directly responsible for the brutality. Their rhetoric is clear and dramatic. They “speak” not as professional artists but as non-professionals, representatives of the majority of citizens of Guatemala who are outraged by the corruption and carnage and want to see justice done. The murals are commemorative and bear witness to the murders and identify with the victims. They are the informal equivalents of the more formal and official legal attempts to bring those responsible for the crimes to justice and to provide restitution to those who have suffered at their hands. At present, officials involved in the genocide have not been brought to trial, though there is strong sentiment that dictators such as Efraim Rios Montt should be made accountable for their crimes. The legal proceedings, however, have themselves been marked by threats and violence. Recently, CCGAP accompaniers have assisted with these legal proceedings and have sometimes themselves received death threats.

### **Accompanier Rhetorical Witnessing**

An accompanier is an outsider who resides in a community for a time to deter violence and to make public any violence that occurs. CCGAP accompaniers initially focused their attention on the community of Fronterizo because the founder and director of CCGAP, Sue Ellen Kingsley, had served as an

accompanier there in 1997. At that time, Fronterizo was comprised of refugees who had fled to Mexico or remained under cover in the jungle in Communities of Population in Resistance (CPRs) during the attacks by the government in the early 1980s. They returned to Guatemala after the peace accords to form a new community in the remote and sparsely populated Ixcán region near the Mexican border. There are no roads to connect Fronterizo to other communities. Those who created Fronterizo came primarily from two indigenous Mayan ethnic groups, the Mam and the Kanjobal. Subsistence farming was one of the few options available in 1997 when the community was established, although more recently some of the men from the community have relocated to the United States to obtain work. In 2006, Fronterizo's two ethnic groups decided to form their own communities and to divide the area they occupied. A second community, Nueva Libertad, emerged. CCGAP now supports both communities. The citizens of Fronterizo and Nueva Libertad live with the constant threat that they will be evicted from their land if questions are raised about who is the legal owner of it.

Kingsley returns to Fronterizo/Nueva Libertad at least once a year. Some years members of the CCGAP board go with her. She founded CCGAP because she wanted to continue the accompaniment project and contribute to the community of Fronterizo. Since 1996, CCGAP has sponsored eleven accompaniers. The organization has also raised money for a building to house

**COPPER COUNTRY GUATEMALA ACCOMPANIMENT PROJECT**  
A Link between Guatemala and the Copper Country



## CCGAP Newsletter

December 2004 Number 29



### **Death Threats and Woodcutting** *Accompanier Reflects on Ambiguities & Realities of Injustice & Poverty*

*Vernon Chow is the accompanier sponsored by CCGAP over the past year. His letters have been heavily edited for this newsletter, but are available in their entirety from the editor by email.*

**SEPTEMBER 2004** Greetings from Rabinal, Guatemala. During much of June and July I was again based in Chimaltenango, so I returned here after almost two months absence to a greatly changed scene. Forests of corn obscured houses which had been easily visible from the road. Paths were now narrow alleys between cornstalks eight feet or taller. Because we often walk on these footpaths the cornfields are not just something you see from a car window, but change the experience as you walk from house to house.

But the feeling has changed for other reasons as well. At lot has to do with what happened to the men who fled the



*Vernon helps with the construction of an adobe house*

in the eighties. When a telephone call came a week later saying "leave today or die" Diego left.

He left behind his horse, his cows, the fence he had been repairing the week before and his unweeded corn. He left it all just as did the people who fled the massa-

buy corn, with the price sure to rise, weighs heavily on people used to walking for hours to save fifty cents bus fare.

At the same time people I work with in the capital, people who aren't preoccupied about subsisting on their corn harvest, are deeply concerned about changes in the political climate. This series of threats coincided with acts of intimidation in the capital, political murders elsewhere, as well as increased political organizing by the civil patrols (ex-PACs) who were responsible for some of the worst brutality in the eighties.

Rallies by the ex-PACs blame human rights groups for why they aren't getting the money promised by the former administration. When exhumations uncover scores of people buried in mass graves, ex-PACs say people are selling the bones of their ancestors to get money. In reality, the accompanier for the roads

an elementary and middle school, and for a day care center, latrines, and the purchase of a pot to boil water for every family. In 2006, a Michigan Tech student chapter of Engineers Without Borders also accompanied her and built each community a well that has potable water.

We will discuss the letters of accompaniers CCGAP has sponsored and published in its *Newsletter* since Flynn became a board member in 2003 (CCGAP *Newsletters*). These include Hale Sargent, Vernon Chow, Laura MacDonald,

Lindsey Engelman, and Kimberly Kern. While Sargent was placed in Fronterizo, because the others were assisting with the attempt to bring government officials to justice, they were placed in communities in which there were massacre survivors. With the exception of Sargent's, all of the original letters had to be reduced so they could be printed in the newsletter. The newsletters also contain articles written by Kingsley to chronicle events in the Guatemalan communities in which the accompaniers resided as well as developments in Fronterizo/ Nueva Libertad. They provide a rich history, therefore, of the aftermath of the genocidal massacres in Guatemala (CCGAP "Newsletters").

The letters are wonderfully detailed and diverse in their orientations, depending on the background of the individual accompanier. Some focus primarily on the details of the daily lives of inhabitants of the community in which they reside, including descriptions of food, agricultural methods, homes, and community life. Some provide extensive historical background. Some discuss technological changes such as the building of a hydroelectric dam that adversely affected many communities. The letters make evident that the accompaniers were witnesses

**The letters make evident that the accompaniers were witnesses who, though outsiders, defended and protected the communities in which they resided.**

who, though outsiders, defended and protected the communities in which they resided. Many made great efforts to understand those communities, in some cases learning a Mayan language so that they could converse with members of the communities who did not speak Spanish, and felt a strong need to communicate what they had experienced to others. We will focus here on two rhetorical strategies. The first involves explaining and defending the life events of the members of the communities as the accompaniers experienced them on a day-to-day basis. The second involves describing the massacres that occurred so as to convey to the audience the enormity of the suffering the communities experienced, to remember the dead, and to urge readers to action in the form of donations or other kinds of support.

Hale Sargent's letter dated April 2003 is a good example of the first. He devotes considerable attention to describing the daily lives of the inhabitants of Fronterizo. Sargent, who spent six months there, begins by setting the scene, making evident the remoteness of the community and the fortitude of its inhabitants whose original expedition to the settlement took eight days (Sargent, "Letter"). Sargent, however, has the benefit of a dirt and gravel road that leads to the Ixcán River which borders Fronterizo. He takes a canoe across the river, then climbs the muddy banks to the community of seventy families. He describes the houses sprinkled throughout the town; the bean and corn fields; young boys riding on horses, machetes hanging from their side; men hiking down from the hillside with bundles of firewood balanced on their backs; women tending the fire at home and pressing out stacks of tortillas.



He emphasizes that the members of the community deal with the uncertainty of not owning the land they inhabit. Before they occupied it, it sheltered a guerilla army and before that, descendants of Spanish colonizers.

Sargent begins the letter by discussing the insecurities of the inhabitants of Fronterizo regarding the ownership of the land and the difficulties they faced when a disease killed nearly all of their chickens; this invites sympathy for the community on the part of the reader. He says,

The government can't formalize the schools until the village can prove whose land they're built on. And the people say one of their neighbors, a wealthy plantation owner, has already come for a visit, ominously bringing with him an engineer to survey the land they have worked so hard to cultivate (3).

Despite these problems, the citizens of Fronterizo are managing quite well, according to Sargent. Their beans are freshly planted, a new mayor is about to take office, and school is beginning again. Families were able to buy a few adult birds and by the new year, their first generation of chicks were nearing adulthood (4).

Sargent also evokes appreciation for the inhabitants of Fronterizo by emphasizing their skills, ones that he admits he does not have. He speaks, for instance, of a woman attempting to climb up a muddy hill with a five-gallon jug of water balanced on her head and another suspended from her back, her infant son struggling under her arms (4). He concludes, "Life for the people of Fronterizo 10 de Mayo is hard" (4). He further illustrates the point by accompanying one of his neighbors to his field. He says, "We walked an hour on jungle trails through ankle-deep mud, his daily commute. The trip itself wore me out" (4). His neighbor, though, had a whole day of planting beans ahead of him. Residents of Fronterizo, he explains, are at the corn mill by four a.m. His description is similar to Vernon Chow's description in his December 2004 letter of logging technology in the community in which he resided; his tone is also appreciative. Chow speaks of a villager working on a very steep slope, using a chainsaw to cut planks from a log fourteen to sixteen inches in diameter (2).

Sargent also sympathetically describes a conversation with a community member who had returned from working for two years in Memphis, Tennessee. Jeronimo recounts crossing the border in the middle of the night with a group of seventeen, only three of whom made it on the first attempt without getting caught. Sargent mentions the economic benefits for families such as Jeronimo's—cement floors, extra animals, and painted houses. He also mentions the disadvantages—women who have to take care of the fields, the house, the shop, and the six children. One woman, Ana, he tells us, hasn't heard from her husband, who left six months ago.

Subsequent accompaniers were situated in communities that had massacre survivors who have agreed to be witnesses in the trials. Laura MacDonald's letter from February 2006 is similarly appreciative of the skills

and accomplishments of the citizens of the community of Cuarto Pueblo where she was an accompanier. Like Sargent, she is self-denigrating, admitting that she came to the village for selfish reasons, to benefit herself, and finds the people in Cuarto Pueblo to be superior to herself in many ways (MacDonald, “Letter”). In answering her question of what love for others would mean, she describes a Catholic priest, Ricardo Falla. He lived with refugees in CPRs and suffered with them. She wonders, “What courage is it that gives someone the strength to stay in such conditions, to face such fear, when they, unlike those around them, have every means of escape available?”

MacDonald, like Sargent, empathetically describes the hardships faced by the inhabitants of her village. She speaks of sickness, suffering, and the hardships of migration. She describes a woman whose daughter had to go into debt for \$15,000 for fake U.S. identification. The daughter works the night shift in a chicken factory making \$60 a night and lives in a building packed with others in the same situation. They give over the bulk of their wages to the owners to pay for their debt and their daily keep. MacDonald says,

There was the war, and now there is migration. I am not trying to equate migration to genocide, but neither can I ignore the connections. Some of the effects are similar, but the true connections lie in the roots of marginalization, poverty, and racism that lie beneath both phenomena.

Other letters demonstrate strong identification with community members and also portray them in a very positive light. Lindsey Engelman spent six months as an accompanier in the Ixcán region in a community with massacre survivors who are witnesses in a genocide trial. In her letter from April 2007, she speaks of one Francisco as the “busiest man in town”: “He has a warmness that reminds me of my own father and I treasure the nights that I do catch him, and can see him act as such a loving father and grandfather” (Engelman, “Letter” 3). She says Francisco has a mother who is ill, but he does not have the 80,000 pesos (approximately \$8,000) it would cost to buy the medicine to cure her (3).

Kimberly Kern, in a letter from April 2007, speaks of the sense of hope in her community of Santa Maria Tzejá. She says, “The collective commitment is evident every day as an ongoing process to raise the quality of life through education and better health standards” (Kern, “Letter” 3). She sees community members as involved directly in decision making processes. Like other accompaniers, she describes their foodways in a very positive light. The men work on their *parcelas* planting or harvesting and sometimes raising cows and horses to sell. The women spend most of the day in the kitchen turning corn into *masa* and *masa* into tortillas. Along with these duties, they wash clothes and take care of their many children. Some work outside the home as teachers in their schools or in community stores.

These appreciative portrayals of inhabitants of the communities in which the accompaniers resided are interspersed with a second rhetorical strategy, references to the massacres, sometimes quite graphic, to the aftermath of the

massacres, and to attempts to bring those responsible for them to justice. Vernon Chow's letter dated December 2004, for instance, includes a moving description of a massacre survivor in Rabinal, the town in which he lived and the 1982 scene of a brutal massacre, the reminders of which are everywhere.

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**The rhetorical stances of the witnesses we have described above are unequivocally critical of the governmental leaders responsible for the genocide in Guatemala and unequivocally supportive of the victims.**

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The woman had a Singer sewing machine and a hoe which kept her alive after her husband was killed. Chow describes one of the inhabitants of Rabinal, whom he refers to pseudonymously as "Diego," receiving a death threat accompanied by a grenade on the eve of the commemoration of the 1982

massacre that left more than 250 dead. The writer of the note closed by saying "happy anniversary." Two weeks later another note repeated the threats, but this time human rights workers were included as well. A week later Diego received a threatening phone call. Diego left the community. Chow speaks of this single threat in the context of a political climate in Guatemala City where threats coincided with acts of intimidation and organizing by civil patrols consisting of individuals who were responsible for some of the worst brutality in the 80s. He emphasizes that compensation for the murder, rape, and destruction caused by civil patrols, promised in the peace accords, have not been forthcoming (Chow, "Letter" 1).

In the December 2005 newsletter, Laura MacDonald reports an account by Doña Lucilla of what are called the "days Before." It reads as follows:

The days Before: Before, there was cardamom that grew up here, and it gave a good price, and the coffee plants exploded with berries, and it gave a good price. The pigs grew fat and the chicken multiplied, and you could sell them all for a price that made it worth all the work that went into raising them. But then there was the war, and the terror. And then there was that day, that day, that day in March 1982 when the army came and tried its damndest to erase all memory of Cuarto Pueblo from the face of this earth. And some people left to be refugees in Mexico and some people tried to survive in the jungle, hiding from the army and sneaking out to sow their crops in between bombings.

MacDonald also speaks in this letter of the military base in nearby Playa Grande which functioned as the central command of the Ixcán region, the place where the massacres were planned and coordinated. She says, "It was here that unknown numbers of people were taken, it was here where they

never again passed through its doors back to the land of the living.” She speaks of the uneasiness of the “ghosts” of the victims:

She also imagines what it must have been like to live in Cuarto Pueblo during the war and hear planes coming to drop bombs. She says she felt a “muted terror rise up in my chest.” She also admits that if she were in the situation she imagines, she would run to get away because she could not face the fear.

Kimberly Kern speaks in her August 2007 letter of the discovery of a “Plan Sofia,” an old military document that reveals that Rios Montt signed the orders for the massacres in the towns of El Quetzal, Huehuetenango, and Chicamán, Quiché. She says that more than three hundred died in El Quetzal and ninety-two died in Chicamán. She quotes Catherine Norris, an organizer with the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala (NISGUA) in Washington, D.C., as saying, “The documents detailing Plan Sofia clearly illustrate an explicit chain of command, with Rios Montt at its head, through which orders of mass extermination were communicated at the height of the conflict.” Kern also describes attending a public hearing of the genocide case, solicited by the Association for Justice and Reconciliation (AJR). She laments that the judicial process is slow and long, but she is optimistic that the case will be successful in the end.

## Conclusion

The rhetorical stances of the witnesses we have described above are unequivocally critical of the governmental leaders responsible for the genocide in Guatemala and unequivocally supportive of the victims. Guatemalan students risk their lives by marching in the annual *Huelga* in opposition to the government and in support of those who were murdered in the massacres. The murals are extensions of these marches, visible evidence of their opposition to the government, commemoration of the dead, and support of the survivors. Accompaniers also risk their lives by residing in communities where violence could break out at any time and by their participation in the trials against the perpetrators of the crimes.

Albert Memmi’s portrayal in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* of the colonizer who does not accept colonialism is not a positive one. He speaks of individuals who will have no place in the future nation or of the political ineffectiveness of the leftist colonizer (38-9). He says, “everything confirms his solitude, bewilderment, and ineffectiveness” (43). He finds that the colonizer who refuses will slowly realize that silence is the only option, or the colonizer who refuses will leave and return to the country of origin (43). The postcolonial situation provides considerably more options for individuals critical of oppressive political and economic structures. Rhetorical witnessing is one of them. Individuals from Guatemala, such as university students, and individuals from outside of Guatemala, such as CCGAP accompaniers, take a strong and unambiguous stand in support of the survivors of the massacres, commemorate the dead, and support efforts to bring those responsible for

the crimes to justice. Carolyn Forché in *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* speaks of the promise of witnessing. She says an opposition to extremity made witnessing necessary in the first place and restores “the dynamic structure of dialectics” (46). She sees that the resistance to terror is what makes the world inhabitable (46). It is the ethical responsibility of all of us, she suggests, to become rhetorical witnesses, to speak out against the oppression of others.

## Note

We wish to thank Sue Ellen Kingsley and Heidi Bostic for their very helpful feedback on a draft of the essay.

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