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Review of *Still Life with Bones: Genocide, Forensics, and What Remains*

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Still Life with Bones: Genocide, Forensics, and What Remains. ALEXA HAGERTY. 2023. Crown Publishing Group, New York. xvi + pp. 228. \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-593-44313-2

Review by: Mack Cristino, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Alexa Hagerty received her PhD in anthropology from Stanford University with much of her research and fieldwork concentrating on human rights. Her book explores the harmonious relationship of forensics and humanity and does so in true poetic fashion. She shares with us her graduate field work experiences in assisting in the recovery and identification of the 200,000 victims and 40,000 ‘disappeared persons’ of the Guatemalan Civil War. She brings to light the human rights abuses and genocide against the Maya peoples over the course of the thirty-six year-long armed conflict at the hands of the corrupted Guatemalan and United States governments. She also recounts her experiences working with other young anthropologists in the identification of the ~25,000 victims of the ‘Dirty War’ termed by the militant right dictatorship in Buenos Aires, Argentina that describes the genocide of ‘subversive’ leftists. Hagerty’s advocacy for the missing’s families is from the heart and sincerely inspiring. She megaphones their stories to the world. Within the book’s fourteen chapters, she encourages the continued momentum of forensics to angle its work empathetically, to always stand up for the marginalized, and to listen to the bones belonging to the souls before us. In this review, I present the main overarching themes of encouraging compassion in the forensic sciences within her work. I also hope to capture the more salient stories that amplify the voices of the victims themselves.

Hagerty opens her book with a description of her graduate program fieldwork in El Quiché, Guatemala. She worked closely with a team of renowned Latin American forensic anthropologists belonging to the *Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala* or FAFG.

Together, they worked tirelessly to recover the victims of *La Violencia*. *La Violencia* is recognized as the most gruesome armed conflicts in Latin American history, resulting from inequality, governmental corruption, and its repression of Mayan language and culture. She vividly described her anxieties during her first excavation, mostly out of fear of accidentally damaging skeletal material as she works in the mass grave. There is a sense of hyperawareness in her metaphorical description of her surroundings whilst on the excavation mission: comparing leaves to the victim's fabric she's found or how the dried buried earth begins to take the shape of the shoe soles. Hagerty is a magician with her words as she recounts her experiences in conducting work in the field, and this is common throughout the book.

Hagerty works alongside Don Jaime, hired local help with the project and one of its leads. Don Jaime and his family are victims of the government's crimes. Hagerty emphasizes both the benefits to the projects and moral obligations of involving indigenous people in archaeology, particularly the victims of forensic circumstances. Don Jaime speaks out and shares his story in a *testimonio*, a story from the heart detailing an experience from the political unrest. Don Jaime and his father were out looking at a section of land and overheard gunshots in the direction of their village. They hid in the cover of the forests and returned to their home at dawn to find his mother and baby brother murdered. Alexa, Don Jaime, and the team continue their excavation of the mass grave. Alexa soon uncovers several more sets of skeletal remains, a few of which were wearing a pair of rubber boots identical to those that the scientists are wearing.

After some progress has been made with the mass grave excavation, Alexa meets with an office bureaucrat as a group with Alvaro, the lead of the forensics team and Zulma, an activist associated with the Maya Human Rights Organization. They are tasked with collecting a couple boxes containing newly identified remains to be repatriated. They belong to a woman and her

young son. Manuel, their next of kin, is present to collect them after winning an arduous legal battle that involved a hearing technicality. This battle involving the repatriation of remains highlights the unjust systems concerning marginalized peoples, and Hagerty calls much attention to this throughout her accounts. Manuel recounts his dangerous *testimonio*. He also witnessed his mother and brother's murder and risked his life to return their bodies and given them the most proper burial they deserved. Manuel and some of the men from his village fled shelter, masked by the dark of night, to bury them whilst abiding by their ritual customs. Burying the dead during this conflict was forbidden, but Manuel and his men were willing to die if it meant that they could return their loved ones to the earth. They left the bodies with clothing and other basic supplies for their journey per the Mayan burial practices. Following their meticulous recovery efforts, the FAFG organization was finally able to make the identifications and it became time to give them their proper ceremonies. Alexa and the team join Manuel in setting up for their ceremonies, and Alvaro participates in the ceremony by handling the skeletal remains. He delicately prepares them for the celebration of life in relative anatomical order. They clothe the remains, and the family moderates correcting some of the ritualistic placements of the remains and offerings. Hagerty vividly describes the proceedings of the celebration and emphasizes the connections of precise science and ritual practices: forensics and funerals. Hagerty describes the emotional experience and stresses the importance of marrying these themes within humanity. There is hardly any point in conducting forensic science if not to bring about peace and closure to the victims and to enact justice upon the corrupted and hateful. Hagerty does an amazing job of amplifying the voices of the victims faced with this prolonged violence and cultural intolerance by passing down their stories.

Hagerty's fieldwork in Guatemala concludes and she soon arrives in Buenos Aires, Argentina to assist in the excavation of the Pozo de Vargas, one of the largest mass grave sites so far discovered in Latin America. Like *La Violencia* in Guatemala, the 'Process of National Reorganization' or the 'Dirty War' as termed by the perpetrators resulted from governmental corruption, cover-up, and racism. Countless innocents were killed. Hagerty describes the site as a water well used as a clandestine burial site during the military dictatorship. Alexa and a team of forensic specialists descend into the well via a lift to begin the excavation of the commingled remains. Their efforts must be timed, as the oxygen levels plummet over time and the air quality decreases substantially with the presence of biohazards. Hagerty and the team resurface and then go to work on the cleaning and analyzing the recovered remains. She works with two young students in the lab, Adriana and Emilia. Whilst there, she meditates on the humanity and beauty of the bones, concentrating on handling them with conscious intention and reverence. This is the predominant theme of her work: "To learn and practice in this field you must tactilely interact with the remains, both physically and emotionally."

Towards the conclusion of her work in Argentina, she interviews Ana Maria Careaga, a professor of psychology (psychoanalysis) at the University of Buenos Aires and a victim of the *military junta* dictatorship of the 1970s. She sits with Ana Maria as she tells the story of her family and their fight against the *desaparecidos* or enforced disappearance of the innocent. Her mother was both an activist and biochemist, helping to birth the political group Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. She rallied many mothers of the missing to present a list of the names and it was soon published to the public. It wasn't before long that the government seized the women due to the intelligence they received from a Naval officer undercover. Hagerty inspires with her story telling of the brave women who put their fists up to face tyranny and impunity.

Alexa Hagerty pours her entire heart into this book in both recounting her own personal experiences and passions in contributing to the repatriation of these victims and in bringing about awareness of such governmental corruption. Millions of innocent people are dead at the hands of greedy figureheads, and it is in the marriage of forensics and empathy that we will solve these crimes and bring these people back to their families. Hagerty's work pleads for the continued growth of empathetic attitudes and a sense of humanity in the forensic sciences.