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Mikaela Cole

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Women’s Voices and the Forces that Oppose Them: The Intersection of Gender and Truth

Finding in Post-Civil War Guatemala

By
Mikaela Cole

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Throughout history there have always been two sides to a story, but what happens when one side is silenced while the other becomes the dominant tale? No group in history has been more silenced than women. Women play an important part within society but because of cultural or social constraints they have often been pushed to the margins. Male narratives have dominated most histories, leaving important pieces of information missing from textbooks everywhere. One example is of the voices of women during times of tragedy. Women have played an important role within the international community especially when it comes to acting as witnesses to tragedies and global atrocities. This subject is important because it provides insight into history through the perspective of those who are most often forgotten. Their testimonies often either go against the conventionally agreed upon histories or add layers of detail that would be missed without the work of these women, especially in their testimonies.

Latin America is important to study as it is quickly developing and is so close to the United States. They are our closest neighbor, yet knowledge about these countries is limited despite the constant economic and military aid given by the United States. Throughout the region terrible atrocities have occurred. These wars and repressions took place in the name of democracy or freedom and almost always with U.S. backing. The stories of these horrors are both national and personal and were often reported by women. In Guatemala, Rigoberta Menchu, Sr. Dianna Ortiz, Jennifer Harbury, and Carole DeVine testified not only their own losses but the losses of the country as a whole. This Latin American country received millions in U.S aid while human rights abuses were committed right in our own backyard. These women are examples of those who tried to tell the truth but experienced challenges specific not only their gender but also their different positions within Guatemalan society.
Throughout history women have been victims of violence often increasing during unstable times. Due to their status women primarily, in cultures across the globe, play key parts not only within larger society but also within the family system. Their importance as wives, mothers, sisters, and as individuals within the community makes them especially susceptible to acts of violence in times of turmoil because of their unique ties to family or culture. Even simply their identity as female often puts them in dangerous situations during times of war, especially around the presence of soldiers whom are primarily male. In any civil war or uprising, women have been counted among the dead, abused, and missing. In a study of sexual violence within Latin American countries, Michele L. Leiby found that wartime sexual violence centers on the power dynamic and loss of control. In the military, degrees as well as physical distance between controlling officers and soldiers creates opportunities for a loss of control over the foot soldiers as well as the lack of knowledge of the higher command about what is happening on the frontlines. This happens especially within militarized states where soldiers are sent to keep control over large areas making it more difficult for higher branches to watch over their actions. Leiby examines the idea of “goal variance,” in which the motives of leaders do not align with the motives of the agents. In this example commanders main goal could be the security of the state while “rank and file” soldiers have their own motives of “personal revenge or gratification”.¹ As a result when put in a position of power the soldiers can execute actions that fall into their own motives while acting on behalf of the state to provide security. Many soldiers threatened women into submission using their weapons and through threatening to kill their children. Put in this type of situation women are left mostly powerless and give in to the violent desires of the soldiers.

Leiby also explains how sexual violence has been used to weaken oppositional forces through “targeted repression or generalized terror.” Soldiers use rape and other sexual violence as ways to demoralize the enemy especially through an attack on cultural values and mores.² It is important to state here that both men and women can be victims of sexual violence, however women are much more frequently victims over men. In many cultures, women’s ‘purity’ is directly linked to their sexuality and as a result, degrades them and makes them impure. This is especially harmful in religious societies or within indigenous communities where these values are core parts of their culture. According to Leiby, the third reason for wartime sexual violence is its use to gather intelligence about an oppositional party through interrogation torture. Lastly, Leiby cites genocide and ethnic cleansing as a motive behind the use of wartime sexual violence.

While Leiby’s work focuses on wartime violence within Guatemala and Peru, her reasons behind the use of sexual violence can be seen worldwide. Within her own writing, she cites the use of sexual violence by the United States Army within detention facilities such as Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib in Iraq where detainees were “subjected to a multitude of sexual abuses during interrogation and detention” including being photographed nude, stripped of their clothing, and other forms of sexual humiliation.³ Leiby also discusses the violence including rape that occurred during the ethnic cleansing of Rwanda as an example of wartime sexual violence outside of Latin America.

Latin America’s unique history makes it an important place to study especially when considering human rights abuses. The Cold War, a time defined by tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, occurred as Europe began to rebuild itself following the end of

² Ibid. P. 449.
³ Ibid. P. 450.
World War II. The implications of this war of ideologies went beyond the European continent and manifested itself within Latin America. In a competition for influence over parts of the globe, the two powers ‘fought’ one another through a series of proxy wars that took place in Latin America as each side provided what seemed like endless military aid to further their cause. For the United States this meant educating military leaders how to combat communist guerilla forces at the School of the Americas while also providing weapons and resources to continue the fight. Similarly, the Soviet Union also offered aid but in the form of backing communist forces or militant groups fighting against the United States backed troops. The United States was putting forth as many resources as needed to combat communism. As a result, communism became a reason for developing countries to obtain money and aid from the United States to fight communist guerilla uprisings. With the main concern of the U.S. being to stop the spread of communism action was non-negotiable causing issues including human rights abuses could slip through the cracks. 4 This led to the violent conflicts between government and citizen groups in Latin America during the 1980’s, which has helped shape the course of its violent and brutal history to today.

This Cold War context provided the conditions where the U.S. backed many military coups within Latin America to ensure that the leaders of the continent’s countries would support U.S. interests especially in terms of ideological standards. Often this lead to the formation of military states as leaders used the military to not only assume but stay in power. These acts of violence by military leaders against their people became a common occurrence across the continent. Those who opposed the rule of their newly instated governments faced harsh consequences including torture, beatings, and in many cases death. As the number of missing

people rose, so did the fervor of those searching for them. As the matriarch of the family, mothers experienced the agony of losing a child without any explanation as to why they were gone. In the case of Argentina, it was a group of grieving mothers who first publicly began to draw awareness to the massive disappearances happening within their country during the years 1976-1983 which made up Argentina’s Dirty War. Beginning with the grief as well as duty they felt as mothers, the women began searching for their missing children or family members finding familiar faces doing the same at every hospital or prison they went to. Soon they began to come together, at first to talk to others that understood the pain but later as a group to collectively protest the government. Their group became known as ‘Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo’ after their meeting spot in a public square called the Plaza de Mayo, or May Square in English, where they convened every Thursday afternoon. They peacefully protested by walking around the square wearing white while holding pictures of their children along with signs demanding the government return or tell the truth about the whereabouts of their family members. They gained international attention and brought their cause to light. An example of women fighting to be heard, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo are one example of women who demanded the truth be acknowledged by the government. Unfortunately for the Guatemalans, efforts to come together were a threat by the government making collective action incredibly challenging. For Guatemala it would mainly be brave individuals who would share the stories of their losses and experiences.

While groups have a lot of power, there are instances of individual women within Latin America who have also worked to bring the truth of the atrocities happening to light. In El Salvador experienced violence also connected to state led terrorism against the people. This led

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6 Ibid. P. 262.
to the attack of small villages by military forces where whole families were killed as a means of turning people away from the communist guerilla fighters. The army’s excuse for attacks was the belief that the villagers were providing for the guerillas in the forms of food or shelter, which in many cases they were, resulting in their support of the guerillas over the state. In accordance to their military training they received at the School of the Americas, a scorched Earth strategy was implemented to not only get rid of guerillas ‘hiding’ within these villages but also do away with guerilla sympathizers while sending a message to surrounding areas about what would happen should villages choose to support the enemies of the state. Rufina Amaya, one of the only survivors of the 1981 El Mozote village massacre, came forward about the events of that day after losing her family in the attack while she miraculously was able to escape and hide in a cactus growth behind her home. Rufina, against her fears, also chose to tell the world the truth about what the army did in her village. She could not live in silence with the knowledge she had as a witness and chose to honor the lives of those lost through sharing the truth. Her story revealed the cruelty of the Salvadoran forces against the villagers and provided investigative journalist Mark Danner a narrative to follow in creating his reconstruction of the events implicating the Salvadoran military in massive human rights abuses, both in El Mozote and other villages. The striking pattern of violence by state actors against rural peoples was heartbreakingly common in Guatemala. Yet the story of what led to this violence began decades before when a forceful leadership change opened the opportunity for military rule.

In 1951, democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz began to work towards accomplishing his campaign promises of social reforms that would help to foster equality among Guatemalans. Arbenz hoped and planned to modernize Guatemala and the first step was to

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decrease the levels of inequality between the people. His plans included educating the indigenous Mayan people, empowering the Guatemalan labor force, and enacting agrarian reforms. One of the largest vehicles of inequality was landholdings between the wealth Guatemalans and the poor indigenous people. Under Decree 900, Arbenz’s land reform proposal, the government would expropriate any uncultivated land over 224 acres. If at least two-thirds or more of the land was under cultivation it would remain untouched. The land expropriated by the government was to be redistributed to native Guatemalans. This included land owned by foreign corporations including the United Fruit Company.

Even though this fallow land would be paid for when taken by the government, it was against U.S. interests for it to lose any hold in Guatemala. By calling this land redistribution a communist style decree the United States government was able to label the Arbenz government as communist. This prompted the 1954 CIA induced coup which replaced President Arbenz with a new American approved leader, Castillo Armas. Armas became the Guatemalan leader and used the U.S. aided Guatemalan army to maintain his power against the rebels or communist guerrillas. Rather than maintaining peace, his armies perpetrated acts of violence that many would not know the extent of until people came forward and truth commissions were formed.

The atrocities only continued after the assassination of Armas left a power vacuum that was then filled by more violent military style leaders. This began the 36-year civil war in which violence reached its peak with many were kidnapped, tortured, and sometimes killed. The rural

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11 Ibid.
Mayan communities have given a name to this period in which they were terrorized by the state; La Violencia includes the time of violence under the 1970s and 80s military regimes of General Lucas Garcia and General Rios Montt. Mass terror spread throughout the country manifesting itself in ‘scorched earth’ campaigns affecting mostly the indigenous people thought to be collaborating or assisting guerillas. During this time massacres occurred killing whole villages while across the state hundreds of thousands of people disappeared. These senseless killings would later be determined as a genocide against the indigenous Mayan people during the discoveries of the truth commissions. One story of a Mayan survivor of La Violencia, Rigoberta Menchu, gained international attention telling the story of the world that many indigenous people lived in during this time.

Within Guatemala, the poorest and most marginalized suffered the most injustice. As a Native Maya, Rigoberta Menchu grew up in the highlands of rural Guatemala within a poor, indigenous family whose main source of income was working within the agricultural field seasonally on farms known as fincas. Seemingly far removed from the rest of the country, her family continued to live up in the mountains among other Maya Indians teaching their children the culture as well as their role within society. Menchu was among the lowest social class, a Maya Indian, within racially charged Guatemala. As a Mayan native her family spent her formative years working on farms as migrant workers to make enough money to barely survive. As a child, she witnessed two of her siblings die of starvation and malnutrition, which was

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common among young native children.\textsuperscript{14} Living into childhood or even adulthood was a success as disease and malnourishment often killed Mayan children. In their culture only the strong survived to continue the Maya traditions and Menchu is indeed an example of a strong, Mayan woman. Menchu’s testimony \textit{I, Rigoberta Menchú}, published in 1983, detailed the violence that native Guatemalans’ dealt with upon the arrival of army forces into their villages. At first the book was greeted in the international community with shock about the conditions in Guatemala and high praise for Menchu. This was often the first time any people in western countries heard anything about what was going on in Guatemala. She had become an activist for indigenous rights, speaking for those who no longer could, and dedicated her life to testifying to the atrocities committed against the indigenous people of Guatemala.\textsuperscript{15}

A testament to the Mayan people, Rigoberta continues to tell the story of her people. In the beginning of her testimony she shares the importance of Mayan culture with readers by starting her story with Mayan birth customs. Even before the child is born, Mayan customs dictate how pregnant families must interact with the developing child in order to bring them into their community. When going about work and chores while pregnant the mother must be aware that the child is “taking all this in” so mother’s must talk to the child to tell them how hard life will be acting as a guide as if “explaining things to a tourist.” An example of this type of speech includes, “You must never abuse nature and you must live your life as honestly as I do.” From before birth the importance of honesty and living according to their community’s customs is taught to the child by parents. This develops further after the birth of the child. Mayans are taught to be “sincere, truthful, and respectful” as their lives are a series of obligations. Mayan


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
culture believes that “Everything that is done today, is done in memory of those who have passed on”. With these values in mind it is easy to see where Menchu gets her sense of duty to tell the story of her people to honor her ancestors and keep their culture alive. By telling the story of poor Guatemalans during this period she is being honest, sincere, and truthful to the world around her while fighting for justice for her own people. Her role as a Mayan woman helped her to grow into her role as an eye-witness testimonial speaker giving her the values as well as the strength to continue to tell stories that both heart breaking and painful.

In 1979 Menchu watched as her sixteen-year-old brother was tortured and killed. Her brother had been ‘sold out’ to the authorities by a man in the community who was paid fifteen quetzals, the equivalent of less than one US dollar, for turning him in as he had been engaged in organizing work. He was kidnapped and tortured until mid-September when Menchu’s mother heard about the public punishments of captured guerillas saying she knew her son would be there. The family made the journey to the village and did find her brother, but he was tortured badly with his whole body swollen to where they could barely recognize him saying, “he had no nails. He had no soles to his feet” and his body was covered in infections from previous wounds. Following an address to the public in which the army men spoke of how being a communist would result in similar treatment, the offenders were lined up and covered in petrol before being set on fire. Menchu witnessed her mother rushing to the body of her brother, “half dead with

16 Ibid. P. 8-17.
18 Ibid. P. 179
grief”, while she “embraced her son [speaking to him] dead and tortured as he was. She kissed him and everything, though he was burnt”.19

Enraged after the death of his son, Menchu’s father left the family to join a group calling for action from the government. In January year? he was part of a group that occupied the Spanish embassy, however the embassy was burned down including all the people inside of it; Menchu lost her father at the hands of the state as well. On April 19, 1980, her mother was kidnapped while going back to their home village saying, “I’ll go back to my home because my community needs me now.” Her mother was tortured and raped by high-ranking officials within the military. They beat her and shaved her head asking her questions about her remaining children’s whereabouts. Meanwhile the army sent messages to Rigoberta and the rest of her community to prove they had captured her mother while asking for her children to step forward because their mother needed them. Overtaken by grief, Rigoberta reached out to one of her older brothers, who told her not to put her life in danger, they would just kill her as well; “they were going to kill my mother anyway…and so we had to accept that my mother was going to die”.20

The death of her mother, father, and brother are only a few on the tragic stories Menchu shares in her book. These acts of wartime violence acted not only to harm the tortured but a much wider community of people, especially within Mayan villages where everyone is like family. Despite the pain of remembrance, Rigoberta goes into as much detail as she can surrounding the executions of her family members to tell their stories.

Rigoberta is an example of a highly-marginalized minority who in normal circumstances would not be a figure of interest. Not only is she an indigenous person from rural Guatemala, the

19 Ibid. P. 173-180
20 Ibid. P. 185-199
obstacles she had to overcome were enormous and only attest to her strength. Growing up she received no education and as a result only spoke her indigenous language. She worked hard and learned Spanish to be able to tell her story to wider audiences herself.21 Menchu currently speaks all over the world against violence as well as the importance of indigenous human rights. She was poor, uneducated, and could not speak any major languages yet because of her determination to tell the story of the Guatemalans she overcame those obstacles. Even further, Menchu was a Mayan woman, which contributed to both her challenges and her success. Her values as a part of the Mayan community gave her the strength and sense of duty to tell the truth of what happened to those she loved. Her unique perspective as a witness and indigenous woman herself gave her insight into how the Mayan communities reacted to and processed their grief. Her written account led to her nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize which she received in 1992. Still this was not enough to keep people from attempting to silence or discredit her accounts of what happened in Guatemala.

In 1991, nearly eight years after the publishing of I, Rigoberta Menchu, a professor of anthropology at Middlebury College, David Stoll, published the findings of his research on Menchu indicting the Nobel Laureate for exaggerating as well as distorting the events within her memoir in Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans.22 According to Stoll’s findings as well as in his statements he argued that Menchu’s representation of the guerilla movement was incorrect and rather some blame for the violence rests upon the guerillas’ actions forcing the state to act in a way as to repress a politically motivated group that included many

indigenous people. Stoll argues Menchu’s success and international attention should be critically analyzed due to the discrepancies within her account. In his introduction, Stoll uses Menchu’s memoir to show that “critical theory can end up revolving around romantic conceptions of indigenous people, mythologies that can be used to sacrifice them for larger causes”. Stoll charges that Menchu’s memoir is riddled with falsities but tells a story that aligns with both a ‘romantic’ worldview of indigenous people as well as being politically motivated.

Stoll’s book received international attention as well, mostly due to his arguments against a voice for peace, even gaining a spot on the front page of the *New York Times*. His book cited two main discrepancies. The first was the physical presence of Menchu at the site of her brother’s death and second her claim of a lack of education. This invited scholars, and individuals other than Stoll, to add and interpret their arguments having to do with Menchu’s testimony. One such person was conservative David Horowitz who called her story a “tissue of lies” and ‘one of the greatest hoaxes of the 20th century’.” The resulting scholarly uproar caught even Stoll off guard and warranted an interview with authors of the *NACLA: Report on the Americas* where Menchu had to defend her own testimony saying:

The implications of the charges against me is that if Rigoberta Menchu- the best-known Indian from Guatemala, a Nobel laureate – is lying, then these Indians, who are unknown, must also be lying about what happened to them during the dirty war…


25 Ibid. P. XV

cry in the silence. It had no objective other than to expose the carnage being deployed against the Guatemalan people.

Menchu acknowledged her disadvantage coming from being an indigenous woman from a small village in the high lands of Guatemala but she also brings attention to the larger repercussions of this claim. She also responds to the idea of her receiving formal schooling as true but only in the regard she spent time at a school. Menchu acted as a servant, mopping floors and cleaning toilets, for a school in the Guatemalan town of Huehuetenango. Rather than imitating the “romantic representations of Maya women,” Menchu instead spoke up becoming the ‘antithesis’ of these stereotypes of indigenous women acting as an example of courage and voice for the others that followed during the interviews by later truth commissions.

Despite the uproar Stoll’s book caused, many scholars also came out in support of Menchu’s testimony, not only on its own, but in relation to the whole conflict within Guatemala. Among them was Latin American scholar Greg Grandin, whose many authored works have an emphasis on Guatemala specifically, who published his defense of Menchu in its entirety as a book in 2011 as Who is Rigoberta Menchu? In his book, he argues that testimonies of other Guatemalans as well as peace commission such as the U.N.’s sanctioned truth commission, the Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), confirm and support the testimony of Menchu relating to violence that took place against innocent villagers by the state. Grandin’s research, like that of many following it, found the actions of the state were in accordance to a

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28 Ibid. P. 8


cultural genocide committed by state forces against the indigenous. Using the CEH, Grandin explains that during the time between Menchu’s book being published and the findings of the commission, 628 army massacres occurred. The words of the CEH itself paint a picture of this violence that has similar tones to the murders of Menchu’s own family:

*evidence of multiple ferocious acts preceding, accompanying, and following the killing of the victims. The assassination of children, often by beating them against the wall or by throwing them alive into graves to later be crushed by the bodies of dead adults…pouring gasoline on people and burning them alive… Indigenous language and dress were repressed…Legitimate authority of the communities was destroyed*31

Despite evidence corroborating the claims of Menchu, there still exist those who believe her memoir to be counter-factual with motivations other than simply giving a voice to the consistently silenced group of the indigenous people of Guatemala. Menchu’s role as an indigenous woman made her an easy target for scholars like Stoll to criticize for questionable motives, nevertheless she held and heralded to the burden of acting as a voice for her people bringing the atrocities of the Guatemalan State to the world at large. To this day, Menchu continues to give speeches on the importance of peace and testimony all over the world.

Menchu was not the only woman to feel the burden of being a voice to the voiceless and act upon it. Connected by a love for the indigenous people as well as the beauty of Guatemala of, Sister Dianna Ortiz spent much of her mission as an Ursuline Nun in Huehuetenango a city in the highlands of Guatemala teaching children to read and write during the 80s.32 Young and enthusiastic about her mission, Ortiz quickly fell in love with the Guatemalan people as she shared in her letters to friends at home. However, even in her first few correspondences there are hints of the violence occurring in Guatemala at the time. Ortiz’s sense of curiosity as well as her

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31 Ibid. P. 5-6
empathy for the mistreating of the people she served in the community led her to ask questions of superiors and write about the things she saw. In her letter post-marked September 1987, she tells the story of a three-year-old child being killed because of the ‘political situation in Guatemala’ and the naturally curious Ortiz found herself warned against asking questions “to the wrong people.” So began her story of tragedy.

In both her written testimony to the United States Department of State and her personal memoir, Sr. Dianna Ortiz begins with the arrival of threatening letters. As written on the second page of her testimony in January 1989 she received a letter addressed to ‘Madre Dianna’ which was slipped under her door with a message along the lines of, “Be careful, people want to hurt you.” The next month another letter arrived by mail saying, “Someone wants to kill you. Don’t go around alone. Leave the country.” The third was left under the windshield wiper of their vehicle also urging her to leave the country. The threats were reported to the Priest she was working with but they were not taken very seriously and he argued that “this was not the early 80’s and foreigners were not being disappeared” meaning that for the most part non-Guatemalans were safe from the abductions being carried out by the army. For Ortiz this was just a small taste of what the people of Guatemala experienced every day, and in order to work in community with them, she did not let these threats interfere with her ministry. For the next few months she did not receive any threats directly but in April 1989, the Guatemalan military came to the village in San Miguel where she was working. Whenever they arrived the army used their power and weapons to order the men of the village to go into the woods to look for guerilla fighters coming specifically on Sundays or whenever the village was planning a community celebration. Ortiz saw this as the way the military could interfere with the church without being

33 Ibid. P. 17
in direct conflict as the military believed they were connected to the guerillas. Due to the church’s platform and belief on the way all people should be treated well as they were made in the image and likeness of God the church became a target as an institution that fostered sympathizers for the guerillas. Ortiz’s own close work with the rural populations caught government attention as they believed she was holding meetings and assisting guerilla forces under the guise of mission work. This is evidence that the military was aware of the presence of the church’s missionaries, including Sr. Ortiz.

That July, Ortiz attended a Spanish course in Guatemala City to become more fluent in Spanish to better communicate and teach in her village. She recalled witnessing protests and demonstrations within the capitol plaza, even recognizing some people with whom she stopped to talk to. A few days after this while walking the streets of the city, Ortiz heard someone call her name and then her arm was grabbed from behind by a man she did not recognize. His message to her was similar to the earlier letters, “we know who you are. You working in Huetenango” before telling her to leave the country.35 Shaken by the experience, Ortiz then left the country in July only to return in September because she wanted to be where her ministry was ‘most valuable’ and she believed that was among the people of Guatemala. Despite threats against her personal safety and the pleas of both friends and family, Ortiz returned out of love for her mission to the people of Guatemala.

On October 13, 1989 Ortiz received a darker warning. In a letter delivered to her in Guatemala City different from the previous few, words cut out from paper spelled out a message: “Eliminate Diana, assassinate, decapitate, rape and other horrible things.” There was also a warning to leave the country. The final warning came four days later in San Miguel in a letter

35 Ibid. P. 4
regarding the army’s knowledge of her presence in the village. Although extremely scared, Ortiz and a fellow sister had already registered for a bible course at a retreat center housed by the Guatemala Sisters for Missionaries and agreed that this would be a safe place to pray and reflect. One last letter was sent to Ortiz at the retreat center itself, but she never received it.36

On the morning of Thursday, November 2, 1989 Ortiz was alone in the enclosed garden of the retreat center reading the bible when a man put a hand on her shoulder and said, “Hola mi amor” in a familiar voice; it was the same man from earlier in Guatemala City. Showing her a gun and threatening her, the man led her through a hidden opening in the garden wall and away from the retreat center. Hours later Ortiz found herself in a warehouse like building which would become her prison for the next few days. From her cell she could hear others being tortured, soon Ortiz would join them in their suffering. Her torturers entered her cell and began to interrogate her by playing a ‘game’ which consisted of them asking her questions and following her answers, no matter what they were, the men would burn her with their cigarettes. In the end Ortiz’s back would be covered in over 100 cigarette burns.

They then showed her pictures of herself including photos from her first months in Guatemala all the way until a few days before her kidnapper grabbed her. She was shown other photos of Guatemalans she did not recognize and asked about their whereabouts or how they were connected to the guerillas. Ortiz was then physically tortured again, however much more violently this time. The pain and trauma she experienced is captured in her own words within her testimony:

Although what they did is too disgusting and humiliating for me to describe in detail, I will share what I can. They raped me numerous times. They poured wine on me and abused my body in horrible ways… I noticed some people removing some kind of large

36 Ibid. P. 4-6
block that was on the ground. There was a pit…suddenly I was raised up and lowered into the pit…filled with dead bodies

After her interaction with the pit she was taken back to her cell where she was sexually abused again. She overheard one of her captors call to another man, named Alejandro, to join in the ‘fun’ but they were met with an answer in English with what Ortiz remarks as “an obscene word that is common in the United States (shit)”. This man, Alejandro, recognized Ortiz as a North American and mentioned that the news was already on television. Apologizing for the mistake, Alejandro helped Ortiz to get dressed and escorted her away from where she was tortured saying he would get her to a friend in the embassy who could get her out of the country. While in his car, it became clearer to Ortiz that he was not Guatemalan but a North American by the way he spoke Spanish. He informed her that they had tried to warn her with the letter, but she had not taken them seriously. At a traffic light, Ortiz took the opportunity to flee from the vehicle and escape where a Guatemalan woman who recognized her from T.V. gave her money for the bus and a payphone to get her in contact with the sister she had gone to the retreat center with. Forty-eight hours after her escape Ortiz was on her way back to the U.S. From there the long, drawn out legal process and healing process would begin yet never quite end for Sr. Ortiz.

Not mentioned in her testimony at this time for mental health reasons, Ortiz also experienced a trauma involving a living suspect within the pit. It is in this pit where Ortiz meets ‘The Woman’ a figure who would haunt her throughout her memoir and most likely into today. Forced by her captors, Ortiz had to look upon this brutally beaten woman who had received treatment much worse than her before made to stab the woman with a machete. Going forward ‘The Woman’ becomes a stand in for all the Guatemalan citizens harmed by the military that Ortiz sees as being the voiceless whom she must give a voice to. (Ortiz, Dianna, Sister, and Patricia Davis. The Blindfold's Eyes. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.) This quotation is from her officially written testimony to the Department of State.

37 Ibid. P. 10-12
38 Ortiz goes into much greater detail about her interactions with Alejandro and her certainty of his being American in her memoir, The Blindfold’s Eye.
39 Ibid. P. 14
The following years led to a similar handling of the Ortiz testimony as the Menchu testimony. Scrutiny was placed on the victim as courts, both American and Guatemalan, worked to ‘solve’ the case of the kidnapped American nun. Despite the struggles of her Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Ortiz continued with the legal proceedings to bring truth to what was happening in Guatemala at the time of her kidnapping. Although painful, Ortiz writes about the importance and necessity for her to share her story in narrative form within the preface of her memoir *The Blindfold’s Eye*. As a survivor of a world that Ortiz sees as ‘one from which few return,’ she dedicates her book to all those to which she made this promise: “I will never forget you. I will tell the world what I have seen and heard” which is similar to Menchu’s promise to the violence she witnessed against her family and her people.40 Unlike Menchu however, Ortiz has a privilege, which she admits to as an American citizen and recognizes the very fact she holds this citizenship may have saved her life and as a result has given her a responsibility. Like Menchu she also has the burden of all Guatemalans who suffered during this time as a survivor with a testimony to tell but the similarities do not stop there. Ortiz also faced her own set of challenges related not only to her gender but also to her mental health status in sharing the truth of her torture in Guatemala.

While Menchu faced scholars, Ortiz was up against political officials as well as their agendas and stories they were telling the public. Even before official legal proceedings began, the Guatemalan government was acting in a way that discredited Ortiz’s accounts. Guatemalan officials quickly claimed that Ortiz’s disappearance was a ‘self-kidnapping’ and, in the words if

a U.S. State Department document, “began an outrageous campaign to discredit her”.41 This idea of her disappearance as a self-kidnapping was spread to outside sources by the President of Guatemala at the time, Vinicio Cerenzo, as well as his Ministers of Defense, Hector Gramajo, and Interior, Carlos Morales. Doubt was being cast on Ortiz’s testimony from the Guatemalan government itself. While aligning his story with the army’s, President Cerenzo told the Guatemalan press that Ortiz’s disappearance was “an act perpetrated by extra-governmental groups not under the control of the authorities” and went further as to tell America’s Watch42 the case was invented to embarrass the Guatemalan government especially with the upcoming Human Rights Commission. Both Gramajo and Morales also argued part of Ortiz’s self-kidnapping was a way to cover up a lesbian love affair going to the extent of citing the gash on Ortiz’s face as the result of a lover’s spat. 43 This lack of action and spread of doubt on behalf of the Guatemalan government took advantage of Ortiz’s status as a recently tortured and released person under great duress to spread fabricated stories to the press as well as human rights groups. This lack of cooperation by the Guatemalan government only continued.

According to a U.S. State Department document, following the appointment of a new Guatemalan President, Jorge Serrano, Ortiz’s case was given Fernando Linares as Guatemala’s first ‘Special Prosecutor’ but he “did nothing to pursue the matter, and in fact continued the government’s cover up”.44 Using the court system Guatemalan officials, including Linares, stymied proceedings by deeming Ortiz’s testimony taken by the U.S. Federal District Court in

42 An advocacy organization or extra-governmental group that investigates human rights violations, there was an investigator assigned to this case as well as claims of human rights abuses in Guatemala as a whole.
Kentucky as unacceptable requiring Ortiz to repeat her testimony all over again and when she fought the decision the courts portrayed her as uncooperative. The Guatemalan security forces and police/military denied the release of investigative materials as well as court permissions to take photographs of the military installation Ortiz said she was held in while tortured. This not only implicates the security forces of Guatemala but also is an example of officials using the advantage of Ortiz’s delicate mental state knowing full well that repetitive reliving of these experiences was incredibly painful for Ortiz as it would be for any victim of this type of torture.

Often appearing with Ortiz in Guatemala and in a number of these hearings was her psychologist whom she became close with after many negative experiences with other health care professionals who, agreeing with the Guatemalan governments, tried to bar Ortiz from testifying. In the case of the Guatemalan Government, they tried to take advantage of the extreme situation of Ortiz’s mental health to postpone or even keep Ortiz from testifying. Ortiz often found herself needing to take breaks between questioning and once even had to stop a session during the recreation walk-through of her abduction. This pain of reliving experiences is written about by both Menchu and Ortiz, however both women chose to overcome the pain and fear to fight for justice.

The Guatemalan government was not the only one acting in ways to discredit Ortiz’s testimony. Her implication of an American operative who seemed to oversee her torturers put the American government, specifically branches such as the CIA and embassy, in a precarious situation. Should Ortiz’s claim be proven true it would give evidence to direct U.S. involvement and knowledge of Guatemalan clandestine prisons where the Guatemalan government would

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take or ‘disappear’ hundreds of thousands of people. At this point the U.S. government was one of the largest providers of aid both financially and militarily to the Guatemalan forces through the School of the Americas where Guatemalan military leaders trained on anti-communist strategies to use themselves.\textsuperscript{46} Should the U.S. be implicated in the human rights abuses in Guatemala, especially within a case involving an American citizen as the victim, there would be massive consequences on a global political scale. As a result, American officials from the embassy to higher leaders also continued to discredit Ortiz’s testimony. In the beginning of 1994, Ortiz released a statement ending with a promise from her to the people of Guatemala saying:

\begin{quote}
Although I may not physically be present in Guatemala, I will continue to struggle for your liberation and your justice! And I say \textit{loud and clear} to the individuals responsible for these acts of disappearances, kidnappings, assassinations, and torture that I will remain a piercing thorn in your side until justice is done!
\end{quote}

Despite years of exhausting and physically taxing work, Ortiz committed her life to bring forth the truth about the violence in Guatemala. Months after the release of this statement, Ortiz received a call from a woman, Jennifer Harbury, who invited Ortiz to join a group she was organizing whose aim was to exert pressure on the U.S. government to change their policies towards Guatemala, which then might force changes within the Latin American country itself. The coalition was made up of others who and been attacked or lost relatives within the country due to the political violence. Harbury also made a promise, similar to Ortiz’s to bring forth the truth of the horrors, and was using her own privileges as a survivor and American in a way to force the world to recognize what was happening in Guatemala.

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Jennifer Harbury, a Harvard graduated lawyer and fighter for justice, began her involvement in Guatemala when she got involved with documenting the stories of Guatemalan refugees in the early 1980s. Touched by the stories of tragedy, she moved to Guatemala to continue her work in documenting the human devastation. While reporting she became involved with people in the underground that were participating in the revolution.47 While up in the mountains Jennifer met a young guerilla commander of the Organization of People in Arms (ORPA) who went by the name of Everardo. Despite being wary of one another at first, Harbury told Ortiz that Everardo had thought she was a CIA plant, after spending more time together the two fell in love. The two did get married, but their story ends very far from happily ever after.

As a commander of one of the four Guatemalan leftist groups fighting the Guatemalan government Everardo, or as he is referred to in official documents as Efrain Bamaca Velasquez, had a target painted on his back. Bamaca was reported missing after his guerilla unit was engaged in a firefight with Guatemalan Army forces in western Guatemala around March 1992. The official report by the Guatemalan government was that Bamaca had been wounded in combat and then killed himself to avoid capture. However, this report was challenged when another guerilla, Santiago Caberea Lopez, testified before the U.N. Human Rights Commission that he saw Bamaca in a military controlled prison “chained to his bed, his body swollen, and his right arm and leg entirely covered in bandages.” With a hope that she could save his life, Harbury began to use her knowledge as a lawyer as well as non-violent protest to demand information about Bamaca’s disappearance. She staged three separate hunger strikes, two in Guatemala City and one in Washington D.C., and petitioned both governments for the release of

her husband.48 It was during this activism that Harbury put together the group that would later include Sr. Dianna Ortiz as well as another American victim of violence in Guatemala, Meredith Larson.

Harbury, like Ortiz, recognized her privilege as a U.S. citizen and decided to use this citizenship to her advantage while working for the release of her husband as well as information about the actions of the Guatemalan government against its own people. While Ortiz was developing her case using the court system, Harbury took to the streets to spread the word about the disappearance of her husband and used her education of legal processes to aid her when interacting with government officials. She used the publicity she received from her hunger strikes to spread the news about the turmoil in Guatemala even, like Ortiz, ending up on T.V. interviewed for the news show 60 Minutes. Articles telling her story of love and loss were published not only on mainstream newspapers like the New York Times but also smaller local papers such as in her hometown of Austin, Texas and her families’ local paper the Richmond Times. With the assistance of this newfound attention, and the help of her family, outrage did put pressure on the U.S. government to search for answers.49 Information was slow to come and Harbury spent years not knowing if her husband was alive or dead all the while defending herself from attempts to discredit or take away from her hard work.

The Guatemalan Government proved to be stubborn and unwilling to help when it came to investigations into its army’s actions. The government continued to stay adamant on their story about Bamaca ‘self-inflicting’ himself with a fatal wound. After numerous negotiations that included pressure from the U.S. Embassy, Harbury was able to get the body of whom the

government said was Bamaca exhumed only to find it was not him. There was at least one more failed exhumation before the truth about Bamaca’s fate became known. In dialogue with the U.S. Government, the Guatemalan Government continued to deny its attempts at covering up its involvement in the disappearance of Bamaca. Throughout memos and the CIA reports, similar to Ortiz’s case, the Guatemalan government is shown as being uncooperative and sticking to one story until absolutely proven wrong as in the example of Bamaca dying and being buried.

Harbury remained hopeful that the information Bamaca had about the guerilla forces would be enough to save his life and that if she continued her work she would be able to free him from the government facility she believed he was being kept in.

In the official CIA report about Bamaca, written in 1995, there were questions regarding the genuineness of Harbury and Bamaca’s marriage. The CIA was only responsible in sharing information with Harbury if the marriage was genuine and if proven otherwise would not have to make as a throughout investigation. As a result, there is a whole section in the report centered around whether the marriage was a true one. Resources that could have been used differently went to finding and verifying the marriage certificate of Bamaca and Harbury as well as finding a discrepancy between when Harbury said they were married and when the certificate was actually dated. On the third page of the report the statement reads that Harbury claimed the marriage to have taken place on September 25, 1991 making their marriage over a year at the time of his disappearance. However, the declaration and registration of marriage was filed on June 22, 1993.50

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As provided by the state of Texas for this report, the country in which Harbury and Bamaca were married did not have computerized marriage certificates at the time that Harbury stated. The clerk who was asked to obtain this information also included different state laws pertaining to other types of marriage that the couple could have filed for which included databases he did not search. Rather than putting all resources towards gaining intelligence about the Guatemalan governments actions or the whereabouts of Bamaca, the CIA went in search of a way to discredit Harbury and in a sense release themselves from the duty of investigating his death as the only responsibility they had was tied to the fact that he had a U.S. citizen for a wife. For the U.S. government, an attempt to discredit Harbury was mostly based on her marital status however the way they dealt with Harbury for the most part came from their silence over the issue of her husband, especially in their efforts to make her stop acting so publicly by telling her to give up hope that her husband was still alive. Continuously Harbury was told that there was no new information or progress made on her husband’s case, but this was far from the truth. Yet behind closed doors the investigation into Bamaca’s disappearance took a dark turn. At this point it is impossible to detangle the case of Michael DeVine, an American citizen who ran an inn in rural Guatemala, from Harbury’s case about Bamaca. Carole DeVine, his wife, would be the one to receive news and information alongside Harbury while also experiencing the frustratingly slow government process when it came to gathering new information.

Michael DeVine and his wife Carole moved to Poptun, a rural town in Guatemala, after traveling through Mexico in the 1960’s. Together they developed an area of land into their inn they named Ixobel Farm which could accommodate around 70 guests attracting adventure seekers and backpackers. Later the two would also open and operate a popular restaurant in

51 Ibid. P. 175-178.
Poptun named La Fonda. The DeVines were “well regarded in the community” and Michael DeVine’s funeral was “reportedly the largest public event in Poptun memory”.\textsuperscript{52} On June 1, 1990 Michael DeVine was kidnapped by a few Guatemalan army soldiers and, as the CIA report on his case finds, was taken to a military base for the soldiers to question DeVine.\textsuperscript{53} Nine days later on June 10, 1990 DeVine was found on the side of a road, next to his Toyota pickup truck, partially decapitated and his body showed evidence of torture. The local police report concluded that the motive behind DeVine’s killing was robbery and the cause of death was a knife wound. Knowing that the local forces in Poptun would not be of help his wife, Carole, was in contact with the embassy about her missing husband and following his death continued to push for information about what happened to him.

In August 1990 the Embassy reports receiving information gathered by a private investigator hired by Carole DeVine and the DeVine family lawyer who helped to uncover information that made it difficult for Guatemalan government to argue against participating in a cover up. According to the private investigator, there were witnesses that saw a truck and its occupants waiting near the entrance of the DeVine’s property. Here the private investigator found a tax form commonly used in the Guatemalan Army to receive rations and located the man who matched the witness descriptions as one of the men waiting for DeVine in the truck. He was also able to connect the truck itself as belonging to the Guatemalan military specifically to a nearby military base with headquarters based at Santa Elena in Flores. DeVine himself returned home at around 3:00 p.m. and both Devine’s vehicle as well as the white pick up truck left the farm. A few hours later witnesses reported seeing both vehicles parked at the site where

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. P. 11.
DeVine’s body was found the next morning with his body badly beaten and the official cause of death being loss of blood from partial decapitation. This information was shared with both Guatemalan officials as well as the U.S. Embassy and despite new information Guatemalan forces continued to claim they were “unable to identify or locate the pickup in question” staying unhelpful to the investigation leading to the Embassy’s report that there was significant evidence of a military coverup. Despite bringing forward the very information that would connect the case to the Guatemalan government and CIA operative, Carole DeVine would not receive any closure about who murdered her husband for at least five years.

In November 1994, after Harbury’s hunger strikes, Carole DeVine was told by then President Clinton’s national security advisor the U.S. had no information on the wellbeing or whereabouts of her husband. A closer look at State Department findings between October to January 1995 point to the opposite. Instead officials found evidence that implicated not only the Guatemalan government but also the U.S. government in the killings of both Bamaca and DeVine.

Colonel Julio Roberto Alpirez was a commander within the Guatemalan Army and had trained under the U.S. School of the Americas in 1970 and again in 1989 when he was added to the C.I.A. payroll as an informant. There is evidence that the U.S. government knew Alpirez was a shady figure. In a cable from the American Embassy to the National Security council, a senior official said of Alpirez:

By all reports, Alpirez is a bad egg. He is corrupt, a liar, and has been negatively involved in matters involving human rights. Alpirez seems to have more wealth than can be explained, there are rumors of past narcotics trafficking and he is tainted by being the Kabil base commander where Michael DeVine was killed…We must be very careful how

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54 Ibid. P. 4-10
we use this information, lest it take on a life of its own, no matter what the later reporting shows.\(^56\)

Dated January 3, 1995 this is evidence that the U.S. government knew about Alpirez as well as his involvement in the DeVine case specifically but also as being a government paid informer with a bad history. Another memo, dated for February of that year, stated that the U.S. Embassy should develop a plan to deal with Alpirez “in the event that there is a major public news story identifying him as a C.I.A. agent.” This memo points to a plan to keep the information as clandestine as possible even though the embassy was aware of both Harbury and Carole DeVine attempting to get information about the status of their husbands. All the while the CIA continued to deny any ties to the Guatemalan government, including to Alpirez, and its involvement in the deaths of the husbands.

Later investigations would lead to the cause of DeVine’s murder being that he stumbled upon a drug trafficking operation run by Alpirez. To keep him quiet he was executed after his torture. Likewise, Bamaca’s death was ordered by Colonel Alpirez after he was tortured in order to gain information about guerilla groups within Guatemala.\(^57\) It would be months before the widows and the public would be notified of the findings, yet neither Harbury or Carole Devine gave up both filing lawsuits through the Freedom of Information Act to obtain documents that were related to the deaths of their husbands which would be granted many years later when the documents were declassified in late 1997 into 1998. Harbury has continued to share the stories of, not only her personal experiences in Guatemala, but also of those she encountered in her

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books such as “Finding Everardo” and “Bridge of Courage” just as Ortiz did in the publication of her memoir.

As history has shown, Truth Commissions act as a way for a nation to find closure and begin to move forward after a national crisis as said in Daniel Rothenberg’s *Memory of Silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission Report,* “Knowledge of the truth, as terrible as it may be, places the people of Guatemala on the right path, preserving the memory of the victims, supporting a culture of mutual respect and engagement with human rights and, in this way, strengthening the democratic process.”58 Every person holds a little bit of the larger story and by sharing it, helps the country heal. Each of the women above did just that sharing their stories with the world about those close to them and the people of Guatemala, many of whom are voiceless victims of an inexcusable violence. Rigoberta Menchu, a Maya native, continues to share her stories of the resiliency of her people and honors the lives of those lost in her personal mission to foster peace across the globe. Despite those who wanted to discredit her and paint her as someone with only selfish, political motives, Menchu stayed true to her Mayan roots and refused to be silenced in the way her people have forced into for years. Sister Dianna Ortiz, a living example of the horrors of Guatemalan clandestine prisons, experienced traumatic torture. She had to overcome not only those who threatened her and wanted to silence her through discrediting her experience but also, she had to conquer the fear of the experience itself. Despite the pain it caused her, Ortiz shared her story as well as those of others to fight for justice for the Guatemalans she served among and loved. Jennifer Harbury, along with Carole DeVine, wives of husbands lost at the hands of the Guatemalan army, used legal methods to receive the truth of the actions the Guatemalan military perpetrated against not only the Guatemalan people but

American citizens too. Without the bravery and persistence of these women, these important pieces of the story would be left out. Despite the forces acting against them, these women refused to be silenced and brought force their own narratives of love and loss not only to expose the injustices committed against themselves but also the violence inflicted upon all Guatemalans.

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**Bibliography of Secondary Sources**


