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The Routinization of Fear in Rural Guatemala

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The state offensive against Guatemalan insurgents laid waste Indigenous highland communities and represents the most extensive attack on those communities since the time of the Spanish Conquest. An important result has been the destruction and restructuring of community social relations through the militarization of daily life. This paper examines the consequent invisible violence of fear and intimidation embedded in the life experiences of the people of Xe'caj. The stories told by women of that community represent both individual and collective accounts of that violence.

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L'offensive de l'état contre les rebelles guatémaltèques a non seulement dévasté les communautés indigènes des pays montagneux mais aussi représente-t-elle l'attaque la plus importante sur ces communautés depuis l'ère de la Conquête espagnole. La destruction et la restructuration des relations sociales communautaires par l'intermédiaire de la militarisation de la vie quotidienne n'en sont que quelques-unes des conséquences importantes. Ce document examine l'invisible et conséquente violence de peur et d'intimidation intégrées dans les expériences de vie du peuple de Xe'caj. Les histoires que racontent les femmes de cette communauté représentent aussi bien les témoignages individuels que collectifs de cette violence.

Recent inscriptions of state power and changes in the penetration of global capital in highland Indigenous communities in Guatemala have been profound. The counterinsurgency war, which reached its height between 1978 and 1984, left over 200,000 people dead, another one million people internally displaced, and compelled tens of thousands of men, women, and children to flee across the Mexican border. By the Guatemalan military's own admission, over 440 rural villages in the highlands were destroyed and countless others partially razed in an effort, they claimed, to sever the guerrillas from their social base of support. It was the most extensive attack on indigenous highland communities since the time of the Spanish Conquest.

One of the notable side effects in this case has been the destruction and restructuring of community social relations through the militarization of daily life. In the aftermath of war, not only have community spatial boundaries been transgressed, but an important element in the resignification process is that many communities now embody the very mechanisms of state terror under the aegis of military control. Army garrisons, civil militias, spies, forced recruitment of young boys and rumours of death lists create deep apprehensions and anxiety. People are afraid to speak about the terror, violence and fear that permeate their lives. Silences add more fear to the instability. As a result of these new arrangements a sense of trust among community members has been severely undermined.

In this paper I examine the invisible violence of fear and intimidation as a result of the militarization of daily life through the quotidian experiences of the people of Xe'caj.[1] In doing so I try to capture a sense of the insecurity that permeates individuals' lives wracked by worries of physical and emotional survival, of grotesque memories, of ongoing militarization, of chronic fear. The stories I relate below are the individual experiences of the women with whom I worked, yet they are also social and collective accounts by virtue of their omnipresence (cf. Lira and Castillo 1991; Martin-Baro 1990).

The Nature of Fear

What is the nature of fear and terror that pervades Guatemalan society today in the aftermath of a brutal counterinsurgency war? How do people understand and experience the conditions under which they live? And what is at stake for people who live in a chronic state of fear?

Fear is a response to danger, but in Guatemala, rather than it being solely a subjective personal experience, it has also penetrated the social memory.[2] And rather than an acute reaction it is a chronic condition. Fear's effects are pervasive and insidious in Guatemala. Fear destabilizes social relations by driving a wedge of distrust within families, between neighbours, among friends. Fear divides communities through suspicion and apprehension not only of strangers but of each other. Fear thrives on ambiguities. Rumours of death lists, and denunciations, gossip and innuendos create a climate of suspiciousness. No one can be sure who is who. The spectacle of torture and death, of massacres and disappearances, in the recent past have become more deeply inscribed into individual bodies and the collective imagination through a constant sense of threat. In the *altiplano* (highlands) fear has become a way of life. Fear the arbiter of power – invisible, indeterminate and silent.

Fear is elusive as a concept, yet you know it when it has you in its grips. Fear like pain is "overwhelmingly present" to the person experiencing it, but it may be barely perceptible to anyone else and almost defies objectification.[3] Subjectively the mundane experience of chronic fear wears down one's sensibility to it. The routinization of fear undermines one's confidence in interpreting the world. My own experiences of fear, and those of the women I know, are much as Taussig (1992a, p. 11) aptly describes: a state of "stringing out the nervous system one way toward hysteria, the other way numbing and apparent acceptance."

While thinking and writing about fear and terror I was inclined to discuss what I was doing with colleagues knowledgeable about "*la situacion*" in Central America. I would describe to them the eerie calm I felt most days, an unease that lies just below the surface of everyday life. Most of the time it was more a visceral rather than visual experience and I tried laboriously to suppress it.

One day I was relating to a friend what it felt like to pretend not to be disturbed by the intermittent threats that were commonplace throughout 1989 and 1990 in Xe'caj. Some weeks the market plaza would be surrounded by five or six tanks while painted-faced soldiers with M-16s in hand perched above us, watching. My friend's response made me nervous all over again. He said that he had initially been upset by the ubiquitous military presence in Central America. He, too, he assured me, had assumed that the local people felt the same. But lately he had been rethinking his position since he had witnessed a number of young women flirting with soldiers, or small groups of local men leaning casually on tanks. Perhaps we North Americans, he continued, were misrepresenting what was going on, reading our own fears into the meaning it had for Central Americans. I went home wondering if perhaps I was being "hysterical," stringing out the nervous (social) system. Had I been too caught up in terror's talk?[4] Gradually I came to realize that terror's power, its matter-of-factness, is exactly about doubting one's own perceptions of reality. The routinization of terror is what fuels its power. Routinization both allows people to live in a chronic state of fear with a façade of normalcy, at the same time that terror permeates and shreds the social fabric. A sensitive and experienced Guatemalan economist noted that a major problem for social scientists working in Guatemala is that to survive they have become inured to the violence, training themselves at first not to react, then later not to feel (see) it. They miss the context in which people live, including themselves. Self-censorship becomes second nature. Bentham's panopticon internalized.

The Routinization of Terror

How does one become socialized to terror? Does it imply conformity or acquiesence to the status quo as my friend suggested? While it is true that with repetitiveness and familiarity people learn to accommodate themselves to terror and fear, low intensity panic remains in the shadow of waking consciousness. One cannot live in a constant state of alertness, and so the chaos one feels becomes infused throughout the body. It surfaces frequently in dreams and chronic illness. Sometimes in the mornings my neighbours and friends would speak of their fears during the night, of being unable to sleep, of being awakened by footsteps or voices, of nightmares of recurring death and violence. After six months of living in Xe'caj I, too, started having my own nighttime hysteria, dreams of death, disappearances and torture. Whisperings, innuendos, rumours of death lists circulating would put everyone on edge. One day a friend, Nacho, from Xe'caj came to my house very anxious. He explained, holding back his tears, that he had heard his name was on the newest death list at the military encampment. As Scheper-Hughes has noted, "the intolerableness of these situations is increased by its ambiguity" (1992, p. 233). A month later two soldiers were killed one Sunday afternoon in a surprise guerrilla attack a kilometre from my house. That evening several women from the village came to visit, emotionally distraught. They worried that "la violencia," which had been stalking them, had at least returned. Doña Maria said that violence is like fire: it can flare up suddenly and burn you.

The people of Xe'caj live under constant surveillance. The *destacamento* (military encampment) looms large in the *pueblo,* situated on a nearby hillside above town, from there everyone's movements come under close scrutiny. The town is laid out spatially in the colonial quadrangle pattern common throughout the *altiplano*. The town square, as well as all the roads leading to the surrounding countryside, are visible from above. The encampment is not obvious from below to an untrained eye. The camouflaged buildings fade into the hillside, but once one has looked down from there it is impossible to forget that those who live below do so in a fishbowl. *Orejas* (literally ears, or spies), military commissioners and civil patrollers provide the backbone of military scrutiny.

Military commissioners are local men, many of whom have been in the army, and in the villages serve as local recruiters and spies for the army. The program was instituted nationwide in the 1960s and was one of the initial steps in the militarization of the rural areas. The civil patrol system was created in 1982 and by 1985 constituted a rural militia of over one million men, over half the highland male population over 15 years of age.

The PACs, as they are known, function to augment military strength and intelligence in areas of conflict, and more importantly to provide vigilance and control over the local population. Although the Guatemalan constitution states explicitly that the PACs are voluntary, failure to participate or opposition to their formation marks one as a subversive in conflictive zones in the *altiplano* (cf. Americas Watch 1986).

The impact of the civil patrols at the local level has been profound. One of the structural effects of the PACs in Xe'caj has been the subordination of traditional village political authority to the local army commander. When I arrived in Xe'caj I went to the mayor (*alcalde*) first to introduce myself. I asked for his permission to work in the township and surrounding villages, but mid-way through my explanation he cut me off abruptly, explaining impatiently that, if I hoped to work here, then what I really needed was the explicit permission of the *comandante* at the army garrison. The civil patrols guard the entrances and exits to the villages in Xe'caj, he said. Without permission from the army the civil patrols would not allow me to enter the villages. My presence as a stranger and foreigner produced suspicions. "Why do you want to live and work here with us? Why do you want to talk with the widows? For whom do you work?" the *alcalde* asked. It was the local army officers who told me it was a free country and that I could do as I pleased, providing I had their permission.

One of the ways terror becomes defused is through subtle messages. Much as Cohn (1987) describes in her unsettling account of the use of language by nuclear scientists to sanitize their involvement in nuclear weaponry, the great effrontery of the modern era, in Guatemala language and symbols are utilized to normalize a continual army presence. From time to time army troops would arrive in *aldeas* obliging the villagers to assemble for a community meeting. The message was more or less the same each time I witnessed these gatherings. The *comandante* would begin by telling the people that the army is their friend, that the soldiers are here to protect them against subversion, against the communists hiding out in the mountains. At the same time he would admonish them that if they did not co-operate Guatemala could become like Nicaragua, El Salvador or Cuba. *Subteniente* Rodriquez explained to me during one such meeting that the army is fulfilling its role of preserving peace and democracy in Guatemala through military control of the entire country. Martin-Baro (1989), one of the six Jesuit priests murdered in San Salvador in 1989, has characterized social perceptions reduced to rigid and simplistic schemes as "official lies," where social knowledge is cast in dichotomous terms, black or white, good or bad, friend or enemy, without the nuances and complexities of lived experience.

I was with a group of widows and young orphan girls one afternoon watching a TV soap opera. It was mid-June a week or so before Army Day. During one of the commercial breaks a series of images of Kaibiles[5] appeared on the screen; they were dressed for combat with painted faces, clenching their rifles and running through the mountains. Each time a new frame appeared there was an audible gasp in the room. The last image was of soldiers emerging from behind corn stalks while the narrator said, "The army is ready to do whatever is necessary to defend the country." One young girl turned to me and said "*si pues, siempre estan listo que se matan la gente*" ("they are always ready to kill the people").

The use of camouflage cloth for clothing and small items sold at the market is a subtle, insidious form of militarization of daily life. Wallets, key chains, belts, caps, and toy helicopters made in Taiwan are disconcerting in this context. As these seemingly mundane objects circulate they normalize the extent to which civilian and military life have commingled in the *altiplano*. Young men who have returned to villages from military service often wear army boots, T-shirts that denote in which military zone they had been stationed, and their dog tags. The boots themselves are significant. The women would say they knew who it was that kidnapped or killed their family members, even if dressed in civilian clothes, because the men were wearing army boots. When my neighbour's cousin on leave from the army came for a visit, the young boys brought him over to my house so they could show me with pride his photo album. As the young soldier stood in the background shyly, Juanito and Reginaldo pointed enthusiastically to photographs of their cousin leaning on a tank with his automatic rifle in hand, a bandolier of bullets slung over his shoulder, while in another he was throwing a hand grenade. Yet these same boys told me many months later, after I had moved into my house and we had become friends, that when I first arrived they were afraid that I might kill them. And Doña Juana, Reginaldo's mother, was shocked to learn that I didn't carry a gun.

In El Salvador, Martin-Baro (1990), analyzed the subjective internalization of war and militarization among a group of 203 children in an effort to understand to what extent they have assimilated the efficacy of violence in solving personal and social problems. While generalizations cannot be drawn from such a limited study, what Martin-Baro found to be significant was that the majority of the children interviewed state that the best way to end the war and attain peace was to eliminate the enemy (whether that be understood as the army or the guerrillas) through violent means. This tendency to internalize violence is what Martin-Baro has referred to as the "militarization of the mind."

The presence of soldiers and ex-soldiers in communities is illustrative of the lived contradictions in the *altiplano* and provides another example of how the routinization of terror functions. The foot soldiers of the army are almost exclusively young rural Mayas, many still boys of 14 and 15 years old, rounded up on army "sweeps" through rural towns. The "recruiters" arrive in two-ton trucks grabbing all young men in sight, usually on festival or market days when large numbers of people have gathered in the centre of the *pueblo*. One morning at dawn I witnessed four such loaded trucks driving out from one of the towns of Xe'caj, soldiers standing in each corner of the truck with rifles pointed outward, the soon to be foot soldiers packed in like cattle. Little is known about the training these young soldiers receive, but anecdotal data from some who are willing to talk suggests that the "training" is designed to break down a sense of personal dignity and respect for other human beings (cf. Forester 1992). As one young man described it to me, "soldiers are trained to kill and nothing more." Another said he learned (in the army) to hate everyone, including himself. The soldiers who pass through the villages on reconnaissance and take up sentry duty in the *pueblos* are Mayas, while the majority of the officers are ladinos, from other regions of the country and who cannot speak the local language. Army policy directs that the foot soldiers and the commanders of the local garrisons change every three months, to prevent soldiers from getting to know the people, a second lieutenant explained. A small but significant number of men in Xe'caj have been in the army. Many young men return home to their natal villages after they are released from military duty. Yet their reintegration into the community is often difficult and problematic. As one villager noted, "they [the men/boys] leave as Indians but they don't come back Indian."

During their time of service in the army some of the soldiers are forced to kill and maim. These young men, often set adrift, go on to become the local military commissioners, heads of the civil patrol, or paid informers for the army. Many are demoralized, frequently drinking and turning violent. Others marry and settle in their villages to resume their lives as best they can.

I met several women whose sons had been in the military when their husbands had been killed by the army. In one disturbing situation I interviewed a widow who described the particularly gruesome death of her husband at the hands of the army, while behind her on the wall prominently displayed was a photograph of her son in his Kaibil uniform. When I asked about him she acknowledged his occasional presence in the household and said nothing more. I was first at a loss to explain the situation and her silence; later I came to understand it as part of the rational inconsistencies that are built into the logic of her fractured life. On a purely objective level it is dangerous to talk about such things with strangers. Perhaps she felt her son's photograph might provide protection in the future. Although I ran into this situation several times, I never felt free to ask more about it. I would give the women the opportunity to say something, but I felt morally unable to pursue this topic. The women would talk freely, although at great pains, about the brutal past, but maintained a stoic silence about the present. Perhaps the women's inability to talk about the fragments of their tragic experiences within the context of larger processes is in itself a survival strategy. How is it that a mother might be able to imagine that her son (the soldier) would perform the same brutish acts as those used against her and her family? To maintain a fragile integrity must she block the association in much the same way women speak of the past atrocities as individual acts, but remain silent about the ongoing process of repression in which they live. Dividing families' loyalties becomes instrumental in perpetuating fear and terror.

Living in a State of Fear

During the first weeks we lived in Xe'caj, Elena, my capable field assistant, and I drove to several villages in the region talking with women, widows, in small groups, asking them if they might be willing to meet with us weekly over the next year or so. At first many people thought we might be representing a development project and therefore distributing material aid. When this proved not to be the case some women lost interest, yet others agreed to participate. During the second week we drove out to Ri bey, a small village that sits in a wide U-shaped valley several thousand metres lower in altitude than Xe'caj and most of the other surrounding hamlets. The one-lane dirt road is a series of switchbacks that cut across several ridges, before beginning the long, slow descent into the valley. Fortunately for me, there was little traffic on these back roads. Bus service had been suspended during the height of the violence in the early 1980s and a decade later it is still virtually non-existent, although a few buses do provide transport to villagers on market day. The biggest obstacle to driving is meeting head-on logging trucks carrying oak and cedar for export. With their heavy loads it is impossible for them to manoeuvre, and so I would invariably have to back up or down hill until I found a turnout wide enough for the truck to pass. Yet the most frightening experience was rounding a curve and suddenly encountering a military patrol.

On this day in February 1989 it was foggy and misty and a cold wind was blowing. Although the air temperature was 50 degrees Fahrenheit the chill penetrated to the bone – "*el expreso de Alaska*," Elena explained. Heading north we caught glimpses of the dark ridges of the Sierra de Cuchamatan brooding in the distance. The scenery was breathtaking, every conceivable hue of green was present; pine, cedar, ash, oak, and wide lush leaves of banana trees, and bromelaides, mingled with the brilliant purple bougainvillaea in bloom, and the ivory calla lilies lining the roadway. These hills, the softness of the sky and the outline of trees created an unforgettable image – this was the Guatemala of eternal spring, of eternal hope. The *milpas* lay fallow after the harvest in late January; only the dried stalks were left half-standing, leaning this way and that. On each side of the road houses were perched on the slopes surrounded by the *milpas* (corn and bean fields). In the *altiplano* several houses made from a mix of cane or corn stalks, abode and wood are usually clustered together. The red tile roofs seen further west have all but disappeared from Xe'caj. Most people now use tin roofs (*lamina*), even though they both retain more heat in the hot dry season and more cold when it is damp and raining. The Department of Chimaltenango was one of the hardest hit by the 1976 earthquake in which more than 75,000 people died and 1 million people were left homeless. Many were crushed under the weight of the tiles as roofs caved in upon them. Today, half-burned houses stand as testimony to the scorched-earth campaign while civil patrollers take up their posts nearby with rifles in hand. Although Elena and I frequently saw a number of people on foot, most women and children ran to hide when they saw us coming. Months passed before women and children walking on the road would accept a ride with me. And even then, many did so reluctantly and most would ask Elena in Kaqchikel if it were true that I wanted to steal their children and whether gringos ate children.[6]

On this particular day Elena and I drove as far as we could and then left my pick-up at the top of the hill at the point where the road became impassable. We walked the last four miles down to the village. Along the way we met local men repairing the large ruts in the road where soil had washed away with heavy September rains. Soil in this area is sandy and unstable. Most of the trees on the ridge above the road have been clear-cut and the erosion is quite pronounced. The men were putting in culverts and filling in the deep crevasses that dissect the road; their only tools were shovels and pick axes. The men are paid $1.50 U.S. per day. This is desirable work, however, because it is one of the few opportunities to earn cash close to home rather than going to coastal plantations.

As we descended into lower elevations Elena and I mused over the fact that there are only seven widows in Ri bey, a village of 300 people. In the several other villages where we had visited women there were thirty to forty widows or about 15 to 20 percent of the population. Perhaps there had not been much violence in Ri bey, I suggested. It was one of the notable features of the military campaign known as "scorched earth" – that neighbouring villages fared quite differently: one was destroyed and another left untouched, depending on the army's perceived understanding of guerrilla support.

Elena and I found Petrona and Tomasa and a third woman sitting in front of the school where we had agreed to meet. We greeted the women and sat down in the sun that was just breaking through the clouds. They had brought several bottles of Pepsi for us to share. I asked Doña Petrona, a small thin woman with an intelligent face, why there are so few widows in Ri bey, holding my breath waiting for the hoped-for answer – that the violence there had been much less. She replied that it was because so many people were killed, not just men but whole families, old people, children, women. The village was deserted for several years, people fled to the mountains, the *pueblo* or the city. Many people never returned. Dead or displaced, no one knows for sure.

This was the third village we had visited and each time it was the same. The women, without prompting, one by one took turns recounting their stories of horror. They would tell the events surrounding the deaths or disappearances of their husbands, fathers, sons, brothers, in vivid detail as if it had happened last week or last month rather than six or eight years ago. And the women – Petrona, Tomasa, Ana, Juana, Martina, Isabel – continued to tell me their stories over and over during the time I lived among them. But why? At first as a stranger, and then later as a friend, why were these women repeatedly recounting their Kafkaesque tales to me? What was in the telling? What was the relationship between silence and testimony? As Suarez-Orozco (1992, p. 367) has noted, "testimony [is] a ritual of both healing and a condemnation of injustice – the concept of testimony contains both connotations of something subjective and private and something objective, judicial, and political." The public spaces we were compelled to use to thwart surveillance were transformed into a liminal space that was both private and public in the recounting.

In each of the villages where I met with women it was always the same in the beginning: we would meet in groups of three or four in front of the village health post, the school or the church, always in a public space. It was three months or more before anyone invited me into her home or spoke with me privately and individually. Above all else they had not wanted the *gringa* (White North American woman) to be seen coming to their house. Under the scrutiny of surveillance the women were afraid of what others in the village might say about them and me. And when I did start going to people's homes rumours did spread about Elena and me. The rumours themselves seemed innocuous to me, that I was helping widows or that I was writing a book about women, yet with potentially dangerous repercussions.

During one particularly tense period my visits caused an uproar. One day when I arrived to visit Marta and Alejandra I found them both very anxious and agitated. When I asked what was going on they said that the military commissioner was looking for me, that people were saying I was helping the widows and talking against others in the community. "There are deep divisions within the community. People don't trust one another," explained Marta. "Families are divided and not everyone thinks alike," Alejandra added.

When I said that I would go look for Don Martin, the military commissioner, they became very upset. "He said that he would take you to the garrison, please don't go, Linda. We know people who went into the garrison and were never seen again." "But I have done nothing wrong," I said. "I must talk with them, find out what is wrong." I worried that my presence might reflect negatively on the women. So I went. Elena, insisting on accompanying me, dismissed my concerns for her well-being by saying "*si nos matan es el problema de ellos*" (if they kill us it will be their problem). Fortunately for us the commissioner wasn't home, so I left a message with his wife.

The next day I decided to go to the *destacamento* alone. The trek to the garrison was a gruelling walk uphill, or so it seemed. The last one hundred yards were the most demanding emotionally. Rounding the bend I saw several soldiers sitting in a small guard house with a machine gun perched on a three-foot stanchion pointed downward and directly at me. The plight of Joseph K in Kafka's *Trial* flashed through my mind – he was accused of a crime for which he must defend himself, but about which he could get no information. "I didn't do anything wrong, I must not look guilty," I told myself like a mantra over and over. I must calm myself, as my stomach churned, my nerves frayed. I arrived breathless and terrified. Ultimately, I knew I was guilty because I was against the system of violence and terror that surrounded me. I asked to speak to the *comandante* who received me outside the gates. This struck me as unusual and increased my agitation, since I had been to the garrison several times before to greet each new *comandante* and to renew my permission papers to continue my work. On the other occasions I had been invited into the compound. The *comandante* said he knew nothing about why I was being harassed by the military commissioner and the civil patrol in Be'cal and he assured me that I could continue with my work and that he personally would look into the situation. A few days later the *comandante* and several soldiers arrived in the *aldea* (village), called a community-wide meeting and instructed everyone to co-operate with the *gringa* who was doing a study.

Later, when the matter had been settled, some of the women explained their concerns to me. They told me stories of how widows from outlying *aldeas*, who had fled to the relative safety of Xe'caj after their husbands had been killed or kidnapped, had been forced to bring food and firewood for the soldiers at the garrison and then they were raped and humiliated at gunpoint. One brave woman carrying a baby on her back, the story goes, went to the garrison demanding to see her husband. The soldiers claimed he was not there, but she knew they were lying because his dog was standing outside the gates, and she insisted that the dog never left his side. Either they still had him or they had already killed him. She demanded to know and told them to go ahead and kill her and the baby because she had nothing more to lose. Today she is a widow.

It was the hour before dawn on a March day in 1981. Doña Petrona had arisen early to warm tortillas for her husband's breakfast before he left to work in the *milpa*. He was going to burn and clean it in preparation for planting soon after the first rains in early May. He had been gone only an hour when neighbours came running to tell her that her husband had been shot and was lying in the road. When Petrona reached him he was already dead. With the help of neighbours she took his body home to prepare for burial. Petrona considers herself lucky because she says that at least she was able to bury him herself, unlike so many women whose husbands were disappeared. These are among what Robert Hertz (1960) has called the "unquiet dead," referring to those who have died a violent or "unnatural" death. Hertz has argued that funeral rituals are a way of strengthening the social bond. Without a proper burial these souls linger in the liminal space between Earth and the afterlife, condemned in time between death and the final obsequies. And yet these wandering "unquiet souls," according to Taussig (1984), may act as intermediaries between nature and the living, buffeting as well as enhancing memories through imagery of a violent history.

The young woman sitting next to Petrona is her daughter, Ana, who is also a widow. Ana took Petrona's nod as a sign to begin. In a quiet voice she said that she was seventeen when her husband was killed on the patio of her house while her two children, Petrona, and her sister stood by helpless and in horror. It was August 1981, five months after her father had been killed. Soldiers came before dawn, pulled her husband out of bed, dragged him outside and punched and kicked him until he was unconscious, and then hacked him to death with machetes.

Tomasa was just beginning to recall the night her husband was kidnapped when a man carrying a load of wood with a tumpline stopped on the path about fifty feet away to ask who I was and why I was in the *aldea*. Don Pedro was the military commissioner in the community. I introduced myself and showed him my permission papers from the *comandante* of the local garrison. After looking at my papers Pedro told me I was free to visit the community but advised me to introduce myself to the head of the civil patrol. Tomasa anxiously resumed her story. Her husband was disappeared by soldiers one night in early 1982. She said that several days later she went to the *municipio* to register his death, and the authorities told her that if he was disappeared he was not considered dead. She did find his mutilated body some weeks later; however, she did not return to register his death until several years later. She was told that she now owed a fine of 100 quetzales (approximately $25 U.S.) because of the lateness of her report. Tomasa planned to leave in a few weeks to pick coffee on a piedmont plantation to earn the money because she wanted legal title to her small parcel of land and her house.

Silence and Secrecy

It was the dual lessons of silence and secrecy that were the most enlightening and disturbing. Silence about the present situation when talking with strangers is a survival strategy that Mayas have long utilized. Their overstated politeness toward ladino society and seeming obliviousness to the jeers and insults hurled at them, their servility in the face of overt racism, may in fact seem as though Mayas have accepted their subservient role in Guatemalan society. Mayan apparent obsequiousness has served as a shield to provide distance and has also been a powerful shaper of Mayan practice. When Elena disclosed to a journalist friend of mine from El Salvador her thoughts about guerrilla incursions today, her family castigated her roundly for speaking, warning her that what she said could be twisted and used against her and her family. Alan Feldman (1992, p.

11) in writing about Northern Ireland notes that secrecy is "an assertion of identity and symbolic capital pushed to the margins. Subaltern groups construct their own margins as fragile insulators from the center."

When asked about the present situation the usual response from most everyone was "*pues, tranquil*" – but it was a fragile calm. Later as I got to know people, when something visible would break through the façade of order, forced propaganda speeches, or in my own town when a soldier was killed and another seriously injured in an ambush, people would whisper fears of a return to *la violencia*. In fact the unspoken but implied second part of "*pues, tranquil*" is "*ahorita, pero mañana saber*" ("It is calm now but who knows about tomorrow"). When I asked a local fellow who is head of a small (self-sufficient) development project that is organizing locally if he is bothered by the army he said no. They (the army) come by every couple of months, and search houses or look at his records, but he considered this "*tranquil*."

Silence can operate as a survival strategy, yet silencing is a powerful mechanism of control enforced through fear. At times when talking with a group of women, our attention would be distracted momentarily by a military plane or helicopter flying close and low. Each of us would lift our heads, watching until it passed out of sight, yet without comment. Sometimes if we were inside a house we might all step out onto the patio to look skyward. Silence. Only once was the silence broken. On that day Doña Tomasa asked rhetorically, after the helicopters had passed overhead, why my government sent bombs to kill people. At Christmas Eve mass 1989, twenty-five soldiers entered the church suddenly, soon after the service had begun. They occupied three middle pews on the men's side, never taking their hands off their rifles, only to leave abruptly after the sermon. Silence. The silences in these cases do not erase individual memories of terror, but create more fear and uncertainty by driving a wedge of paranoia between people. Terror's effects are not only psychological and individual, but social and collective as well.

Despite the fear and terror engendered by relentless human rights violations and deeply entrenched impunity in Guatemala, hope exists. Refugees, widows, the internally displaced, Mayan groups, human rights organizations have formed in response to the repression.

One of the collective responses to the silence imposed through terror began in 1984 when two dozen people, mostly women, formed the human rights organization called the GAM (Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo). Its members are relatives of some of the estimated 42,000 people disappeared in Guatemala over the past three decades. Modelled after Las Madres de

Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, s small group of courageous women and men decided to break the silence. They went to government offices to demand that authorities investigate the crimes against their families. They also turned their bodies into "weapons" to speak out against the violence. As they marched in silence every Friday in front of the national palace with placards bearing the photos of those who had disappeared, they ruptured the official silence, bearing testimony with their own bodies about those who have vanished.

In 1990, Roberto Lemus, a judge in the district court of Santa Cruz del Quiche, began accepting petitions from local people to exhume sites in the villages where people claimed there were clandestine graves. Family members said they knew where their loved ones had been buried after being killed by security forces. While other judges in the area had previously allowed the exhumations, this was the first time that a scientific team had been assembled under the auspices of the eminent forensic anthropologist Dr. Clyde Snow. The intent of the exhumations was to gather evidence to corroborate verbal testimonies of survivors in order to arrest those responsible. Because of repeated death threats Judge Lemus was forced into political exile in July 1991. Dr. Snow has assembled another team sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science that continues the work in Guatemala at the behest of human rights groups. There are estimated to be hundreds, perhaps thousands of such sites throughout the *altiplano*. The clandestine cemeteries and mass graves are the "*secreto a voces*" – or what Taussig (1992c) has referred to in another context as the "public secrets" – what everyone knows about but does not dare to speak of publicly.

In Xe'caj people would point out such sites to me. On several occasions when I would be walking with them in the mountains women would take me to the places where they knew their husbands were buried and say, "*mira, él está allí*'" (look, he is over there). Others claimed that there were at least three mass graves in Xe'caj itself. The act of unearthing the bones of family members allows individuals to acknowledge and reconcile the past openly, to at last acknowledge the culpability for the death of their loved ones, and to lay them to rest. At the same time it is one of the most powerful statements against impunity because it reveals the magnitude of the political repression that has taken place. These were not solely individual acts with individual consequences; they are public crimes that have deeply penetrated the social body and contest the legitimacy of the body politic.

Thus, it is the dual issues of impunity and accountability that stand between peace and social justice in Guatemala, as has been the case in Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil and El Salvador (cf. Weschler 1990). As such, amnesty becomes both a political and ethical problem with not only individual but social dimensions. "To forgive and forget," the Guatemalan human rights ombudsman (and as of 1993, President of Guatemala) suggested, is the only way democracy will be achieved in Guatemala. Ramiro de Leon Carpio in a newspaper interview (*La Hora* 1991) said, "the ideal would be that we uncover the truth, to make public and to punish those responsible, but I believe it is impossible . . . we have to be realistic." Certainly the idea of political expediency has a measure of validity to it. The problem, however, turns on "whether that pardon and renunciation are going to be established on a foundation of truth and justice or on lies and continued injustice" (Martin-Baro, 1990, p. 7). Hannah Arendt (1973) has argued against forgiveness without accountability because it undermines the formation of democracy by obviating any hope of justice and makes its pursuit pointless.

Secondly, while recognizing that forgiveness is an essential element for freedom, Arendt contends that "the alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite (which she argues is vengeance), is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly." Self-imposed amnesty by the military, which has become the vogue throughout Latin America in recent years, forecloses the very possibility of forgiveness. Without a settling of accounts democratic rule will remain elusive in Guatemala, as has been the case elsewhere in Latin America. Social reparation is a necessary requisite to healing the body politic in Latin America.

The Embodiment of Violence

Many of the widows of Xe'caj have never recovered from their experiences of fear and repression as they continue to live in a chronic state of emotional, physical and social trauma. As Suarez-Orozco (1990) found among Central America refugees living in Los Angeles, people carry their psychological horror with them even into situations of relative safety. Their nightmares stalk them.

The women of Xe'caj carry their pains, their sufferings, and their testimonies in their bodies. Their silenced voices speak poignantly through their bodies of their sadness, loneliness, and desolation, of chronic poverty and doubt. The women suffer from headaches, gastritis, ulcers, weakness, diarrhoea, irritability, inability to sleep, weak blood – diseases usually clustered under the syndrome of post-traumatic distress – and of "folk" illnesses such as *nervios* (nerves), *susto* (fright), *penas* (pain, sorrow, grief). To simply categorize their sufferings, however, as either manifestations of clinical symptoms or culture-bound constructions of reality is to dehistoricize and dehumanize their lived experiences.

Doña Isabel has had a constant headache since the day they disappeared her husband seven years ago. It never leaves her, she says. Doña Juana has a chronic pain in her heart because of her sadness; she cannot forget witnessing the brutal killing of her husband and son. Doña Martina cannot eat because of her *nervios*. She worries how she will feed her children, how she will earn money to buy what she needs at the market. Don Jose, a village health promoter, describes in vivid detail the many children who were born during the violence who now have multiple health problems and deficiencies due to the *susto*, fear and malnutrition that their mothers suffered.

In these instances what is noteworthy is that the women of Xe'caj pinpointed the onset of their physical problems to the events surrounding the death or disappearance of their husbands, sons or fathers and related those facts to a commentary on the chronicity of their physical, social and economic problems. The sick roll in these cases is inherently dangerous, but the danger is quite different than that imagined by Talcott Parsons (1974) in his seminal article on the social consequences of the sick roll. In this situation illness related to political violence is a refusal on the one hand to break the ties with the person who was killed or disappeared through the maintenance of illness. The bereavement process has yet to be completed. It is a moral refusal to get well. The women's illnesses become actual physical representations of the widespread violence against the Mayan civilian population and for which there has yet to be resolution. The body stands as political testimony, as "collective protest strategy." While somatization as a political idiom may be a dangerous game to play, as Scheper-Hughes (1992) has noted in the Brazilian context, it also opens possibilities. The women have come to represent the horror of what they have witnessed through their bodies, and as such pain and suffering expressed through illness become a powerful communicative force.

While I am not suggesting that this is a wholly conscious act of the part of all the women, there does seem to be a level of awareness where the women attribute political causality to particular illnesses. And the widespread nature of these complaints forges a communality and sense of sharing among the women. Their voices may be silenced by fear and terror, but their bodies have become sites of social and political memory.

Notes

1 This article is based on field research conducted during 1988–1991 in three contiguous *municipios* in the Department of Chimaltenango in the central highlands of Guatemala with a combined population of approximately 50,000 people. In the article I refer to all three *municipios* simply as Xe'caj and have used other fictitious names for the surrounding *aldeas*.

2 Connerton (1989, p. 12) has defined social memory as "images of the past that commonly legitimate a present social order." In Guatemala fear inculcated into the social memory has engendered a forced acquiescence on the part of many Mayas to the status quo. At the same time a distinctly Mayan (counter) social memory exists, for example, the indigenous dances, especially the dance of the Conquista, oral narratives, the relationship with the antepasados maintained through the planting of corn, the weaving of cloth, and religious ceremonies.

3 See Scary (1985, p. 5) discussion on the inexpressibility of physical pain. While Scary contends that it is only physical pain that can be characterized with no "referential content, . . . it is not of or for anything," I would argue differently. The power of terror of the sort that is endemic in Guatemala and in much of Latin America, lies precisely in its subjectification and silence.

4 Taussig (1992a) notes that terror's talk is about "ordered disorder," a discourse that turns the expected relationship between the normal and the abnormal, the exception and the rule on its head, while it absorbs and conceals the violence and chaos of everyday life through a veneer of seeming stability.

5 Kaibiles are the elite special forces troops of the Guatemalan army especially trained in counterinsurgency tactics. An excerpt from an address by General Juan Jose Marroquin to a graduating class of Kaibiles on 6 December 1989 is revealing: "Kaibil officers are trained to forget all humanitarian principles and to become war machines, capable of enduring whatever sacrifices, because from now on, they will be called Masters of War and Messenger of Death." (As reported in the national newspaper, *El Grafico*, December 7, 1989.)

6 Rumours of foreigners and strangers eating children are not limited to the women of Xe'caj or other areas of Guatemala. Scheper-Hughes found similar concerns among the people of Northeast Brazil. She also notes the prevalence of Pishtaco myths among Andean Indians (1992, pp. 236–37) who believed that Indian fat and in particular Indian children's fat, were used to grease the machinery of the sugar mills. In the 1980s a biological anthropologist working among Andean people found his research stymied because of rumours that the measurement of fat folds was actually a selecting process designed to choose "the fattest for their nefarious purposes."

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