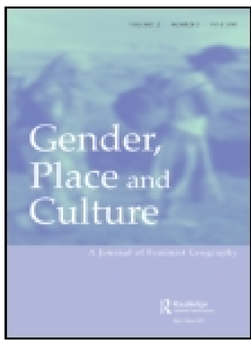

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VIEWPOINT

At peace in the corn: Maya narratives and the dynamics of fieldwork in Guatemala

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Between 1961 and 1996 civil war in Guatemala claimed the lives of an estimated 200,000 people, over 80% of whom (according to a United Nations Truth Commission) were Maya Indians. The experience of one Maya family, whose story is narrated, raises questions pertaining to continued insecurity, lack of justice, and uninvestigated crimes, the combined effects of which still haunt and charge community life throughout the countryside. Telling about the experience of one family also raises issues concerning the vicissitudes of representation and how fieldwork can, on occasion, yield unanticipated but rewarding returns.

Keywords: Guatemala; civil war; Rigoberta Menchú; Magdalena González; Maya testimony; storytelling

The truth about stories is that that's all we are.

Thomas King (2003)

In one of his most celebrated essays, anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1983) warned of the problems that researchers run into when they seek to write about an experience 'from the native's point of view'. In the context of Guatemala, given the ability of Maya peoples to develop writing systems and record their own versions of what has befallen them, we are fortunate to be able to elicit indigenous perspectives directly (Carmack 1973). Oral tradition also runs deep among the Maya. As Geertz (1988, 130–132) asserts in another essay, however, 'getting "their" lives into "our" works' in these charged post-colonial times 'has turned morally, politically, and even epistemologically, delicate'. The controversy generated by the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú (1984) is an instructive case in point.

First given a voice in Spanish, then French, English, and a dozen or so languages thereafter, by the time the K'iche' Maya woman was honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 she already enjoyed worldwide recognition. Rigoberta's global appeal hinges on what she stresses at the outset of her narrative, that her story 'is the story of all poor Guatemalans'. On this she is both resolute and unequivocal: 'My personal experience is the reality of a whole people' (Menchú 1983, 1). Empowering 'an Indian woman in Guatemala' to speak for 'a whole people' inevitably triggered a reaction against the veracity and legitimacy of such a claim, indeed the existential basis upon which it rested and was articulated. An 'exposé'

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by David Stoll (1999) in turn sparked a rejoinder to his lugubrious dissection (Arias 2001), a forum to which a colleague and I contributed. We concluded that Stoll 'could easily have arranged his findings to support what Menchú has to say as much as criticize her for how she goes about saying it' (Lovell and Lutz 2001, 195). Stoll appears not the least bit interested in such reconciliation, instead believing that, unless Rigoberta's narrative can withstand being held accountable to the norms of social science, any flaws or inconsistencies revealed in the course of the exercise tarnish her testimony, cast doubt over its factual accuracy, and thus render it suspect if not spurious. It is then a logical next step to denounce the entire narrative as mere fabrication or perhaps even lies, grist to the mill of Rigoberta's detractors and political adversaries, of whom there are many, both inside Guatemala and beyond its borders.

Having served as a translator for Rigoberta during one of her North American solidarity tours before she became a Nobel laureate (Lovell 2000 [1995]), I was well aware of the difficulties of cross-cultural communication. Rigoberta, however, relayed her message to one packed church hall after another with such dignified assurance that questioning her authority was not an issue at any of the gatherings that I heard her address. Nor, for that matter, was the thorny business of power, as Rigoberta made it clear at the outset that my job was to concentrate on putting her words into English. She alone, in terms of our relationship, would shape her narrative, be its sole architect, influence its texture, and assume responsibility for audience reaction by drawing upon her skills as a seasoned orator.

Magdalena González had none of Rigoberta's acumen, but her story too is one shared, if not by 'all Guatemalans', then by a good many, especially those who lived (and died) in K'iche' country during the ravages of civil war. I met Doña Magdalena while working on a documentary film series shot on location in Guatemala (Cambridge Studios 1996). Though I was pleased to participate in the film project, I felt afterwards that something was missing from the 'on screen' portrayals that only textual narration could make up for. With the approval of Doña Magdalena and surviving members of her family, I set about the task of interviewing them, with a view to writing a story in which Doña Magdalena would be the main protagonist.

After several visits I considered I had sufficient material to put pen to paper. When I did so I leaned on how other colleagues had tackled similar objectives while conducting research on Guatemalan women, Marilyn Anderson and Jonathan Garlock (1988), Margaret Hooks (1993), and Emilie Smith-Ayala (1991) among them. I ruled out a 'direct voice' approach, as Elisabeth Burgos-Debray had opted for with Rigoberta, since Doña Magdalena had neither the temperament nor the inclination to be tape-recorded with a hand-held microphone for long periods. Aware that control of narration would be in my hands, I sought to clarify and check what was told me as much as possible, asking the same questions time and again, which surely tried people's patience. In the end, it all came down to mutual trust and confidence, as Linda Green (1999) and Judith Zur (1998) emphasize in their in-depth work on Maya women made widows by civil strife in Guatemala.

Is it possible to tell a story from someone else's point of view? Perhaps not, at least without becoming overtly self-conscious and paralyzed by some of the 'delicate' issues that characterize the process. I was most fortunate to get to know a remarkable Maya woman who confided in me and who shared with me, as our relationship evolved, memories that scarred her life. What follows, then, is someone else's story narrated by me, in which I cannot deny imbalances of privilege and power but in which a very unusual field experience nagged at me to be told.

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'My grandmother says we did nothing wrong and so have nothing to hide. Use her real name, if you wish, and take a photograph of her. Tell people what happened to us.'

Paulino relayed the old lady's words with no hint of emotion. His grandmother, Magdalena González, sat on a wooden bench weaving *trenzas*, narrow palm bands used in Guatemala to line the inside of hats. The fingers of her hands sped dexterously. One of Paulino's daughters, Lucía, stuck as close to Doña Magdalena as the art of *trenza* production allowed. Though 80 years or more separated them, infant girl and family matriarch wore identical clothing: wrap-around skirts made of tie-dye fabric and cotton blouses whose rosy hue was set off smartly by embroidered collars. Two Maya women spanning four generations, they were a perfect match.

'Fine, then', I said to Paulino. 'Why don't I start by taking some shots of your grandmother with her *trenzas*?' Paulino translated my Spanish into K'iche'. Doña Magdalena worked away, glancing up occasionally as I moved about the patio. All around me I could hear people engaged in household chores – firewood being split, corn husked, clothes washed. Everyone was doing something, even little Lucía, arranging palm strands neatly in a row.

'I'd like some close-ups. Can you ask your grandmother to stop weaving and look directly at the camera?'

Paulino served as go-between once more. His grandmother laid down a *trenza* and gestured to Lucía, who slid along the wooden bench toward her, snuggling tight. Doña Magdalena stared at me, her eyes focused and unwavering, her gaze penetrating the lens in such a way that I knew I had a photograph I could use. I clicked the shutter and signalled my thanks.

'Let your grandmother know that when I write about your family next time, I will do as she agrees. I won't make up a name for her. She'll be herself.'

Paulino nodded. I gathered up my equipment and made my way back to the jeep. Doña Magdalena stood watching from the entrance to the family compound, to where she'd hobbled with the help of her walking stick. Paulino's wife, María, managed to wave goodbye even with a baby in her arms. She would give birth to another by the time I was able to return.

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The story of Doña Magdalena is the story of untold thousands of indigenous Guatemalans. Born and raised in the highlands around Santa Cruz del Quiché, she married in the 1930s while still in her teens, moving from her home in San Sebastián to her husband's in San José, a few kilometres away. Poor even by local standards as they started out, the young couple saw their situation improve over the years when, instead of giving birth to six or eight or ten children, Doña Magdalena only had one.

Diego was Doña Magdalena's pride and joy. Seeing how hard his mother and father worked, and with no other siblings to compete for their attention, Diego knew he was far more fortunate than other children in San José. Shipped off to school each day in Santa Cruz and growing up in a household where the needs of a mere three people had to be satisfied, much was expected of him. Favourable family circumstances never spoiled him. He learned to read and write, but not at the expense of knowing how to work the land, for Diego became a good farmer who well understood that the ten acres his parents had sweated to own was an asset not to be squandered. In the 1960s he got involved with Catholic Action, whose development initiatives he was able to channel to the betterment of San José. A school got built, running water installed, and a road constructed that linked San Jose more conveniently to Santa Cruz. After the earthquake struck in 1976, Diego rallied the villagers and coordinated efforts to restore their ruined church. He emerged as a community leader, respected by most but not by all, for there

were some in San José jealous of Diego's success, scornful of his industry and energetic ways.

The children that his parents never had Diego had for them, four boys and three girls. Though the presence of more mouths to feed taxed family resources, Diego laboured to ensure that his offspring had the same opportunities he had received, the rudiments of an education most of all. What a family of three once enjoyed now had to be shared among 11. Survival, not prosperity, was the goal. With Diego at the helm there was enough to make ends meet until the repression hit.

His social conscience and concern for the community made him an easy target. In the fear-filled years of the 1980s, Diego's 'Catholic Action' was construed as 'communist subversion' by neighbours who did not like him. Rumours began to circulate, fuelled by the bitterness of envy. During the worst of the killings, in 1981 and 1982, Diego thought it best to leave San José and hide out in Guatemala City. He was in the capital when word reached him that the civil defence patrol in San José had murdered his father for refusing to reveal Diego's whereabouts. When Diego returned home to deal with the matter, the civil defence patrol pounced and killed him too. Doña Magdalena and Diego's wife were widows, his seven children – Paulino, the second oldest, was barely 11 at the time – without a father. They were victims of a civil war perpetrated in the guise of anti-communism, a civil war in which unarmed civilians like Diego and his father were the bulk of over 200,000 casualties. It would be a decade before Doña Magdalena summoned the resolve to tell her story.

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I got to know Doña Magdalena while working with colleagues on a documentary film series about countries in crisis, for which Guatemala was chosen as a pilot study. By the time we first met, Paulino had assumed the role of bread winner, staying on in San José to look after his grandmother as he and María started a family of their own. In 1995, I published a book with a version of the events that had so affected Doña Magdalena and her grandchildren, believing it prudent not to disclose her true identity. After a peace accord was signed in 1996 by the Guatemalan government and guerrilla forces that had fought for 36 years to change a brutal social order, human rights initiatives launched by the Catholic Church and the United Nations encouraged people to speak out, even if no guarantees could be made for their safety. It was then that I contacted Paulino to see if he would talk with his grandmother and seek her approval for me to narrate what took place in San José without resorting to pseudonyms. My desire to include photographs of leading protagonists in a new edition of my book made the use of pseudonyms redundant. Her agreement on both counts enabled me to feature Doña Magdalena under her own name (Lovell 2000 [1995]).

***

I travelled to San José a week before Christmas, reflecting en route that no season of goodwill ever prevailed in Guatemala. The signing of the peace accord marked a formal end to hostilities, but terror lurked and violence still flared up. Bishop Juan Gerardi, who headed the Catholic Church's investigation into the causes and consequences of conflict, had been beaten to death two days after he presented a report that attributed the majority of killings during the war to the national armed forces, with civil defence patrols organized and controlled by the military also implicated. If a high-profile figure like Gerardi could be eliminated and his assassins allowed to escape justice, then ordinary citizens like Doña Magdalena had to be wary. In San José, I learned later, members of the civil defence patrol, the very men responsible for the deaths of Doña Magdalena's husband and son,

were not only at large but held positions of authority, placed in charge of community projects that Diego once had supervised.

Arriving unannounced, I walked along the trail that led from the school toward the family compound. A dog barked as I drew near. Two children peered from behind a line of washing to see who was approaching. I recognized little Lucía, who had not grown by much in over a year. She ran to fetch her father. Paulino wiped some dirt from his hand before he extended it in welcome.

'*Buenos días, Jorge*. You've come back to visit us. We wondered when you would.'

He invited me to sit down and offered me a cup of *atol*, a hot drink made of cornmeal and spiced with peppers. I sipped it while saying hello to family of all ages who joined us in the patio. Out of a room adjacent to the compound entrance stepped Doña Magdalena, not looking any older than when last I saw her but limping more noticeably. Paulino helped her to a chair. I smiled at her as she made herself comfortable. Doña Magdalena smiled back.

> 'I have a present for you'.
> Paulino translated as I handed her a gift.
> 'These are for you to share among the children', I said to Paulino.

The bag he took from me I had filled with crayons, notepads, candy, and chewing gum. A couple of youngsters rushed to Paulino. Doña Magdalena, meanwhile, held the small package as if she didn't quite know what to do, looking at it quizzically until Paulino's wife helped her undo the wrapping.

'It's a book. A book with photographs for you to look at', I said.

Since neither woman could read, I took the book and opened it at the section containing photographs. I pointed to the image on the upper right of the first page.

'*Es la abuela*!' Paulino's wife exclaimed. '*Es la abuela con Lucía!*'

The youngsters dipping their hands into the bag I'd given Paulino scurried to their mother's side to see for themselves. Their shouts brought more children gathering around. Doña Magdalena joined in with her own cries. Then she fell quiet, examined the photograph below the one of herself and Lucía, and let out the loudest cry of all.

'What's she saying?' I asked Paulino.

Beneath the image of Doña Magdalena and her great-granddaughter was a photograph of Rigoberta Menchú, the Maya woman who in 1992 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work as a human rights activist. It was Rigoberta's testimony, before any fact-finding missions were feasible and revelations about atrocities widely known, that alerted the outside world to the horrors of civil war in Guatemala. Doña Magdalena brandished the book over her head.

'I won't be as famous', she declared in a voice tinged with sadness. 'But people will see me in a book with Rigoberta Menchú and know that we share the same experiences.'

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When I visited San José two years later I found out from the woman who tends the village store that Doña Magdalena had died. The storekeeper had watched me park the jeep and thought to tell me before I took the path to the family compound. I thanked her and cursed myself for not having made the trip sooner.

I walked to the family compound, which was eerily empty. Not even a dog barked in warning. I called aloud several times but nobody replied. A radio had been left on. The drone of *marimba* music was a fitting lament.

Knowing that children were still in school – I had heard a class chant a multiplication table as I walked past – I returned to wait in the playground. During recess I asked

a teacher if he could help me identify one of Paulino's boys or girls. 'I've been out to the house', I explained, 'but no one's home. I'd like to pay my respects. Someone in the family I knew is dead.'

The teacher helped me locate the eldest of Paulino's daughters, who recognized me.

'My father is working in Santa Cruz and won't be back until dark. My mother is at my aunt's. I'll get her for you.'

The girl crossed the playground to a house that lay behind the village store. I followed her. Paulino's wife, Maria, appeared and greeted me.

'I'm sorry to hear about Doña Magdalena', I said. 'I understand that Paulino won't be back until later this evening. Would it be possible for you to take me to see her grave?'

María agreed. She led me to a plot of ground two kilometres away. The family had buried Doña Magdalena not in the local cemetery, where the killers of her husband and her son one day would be, but in a clearing we walked to through fields of towering corn.

A wooden cross, painted red, distinguishes Doña Magdalena's grave from a handful of others. María approached and stood over it. A baby peered out from the shawl tied to her back. A barefoot toddler held on to her mother's skirt. Laid to rest in a clearing by a cornfield, Doña Magdalena's struggle is over.

We returned in silence to San José. The school that Diego helped to build was emptying out. Hordes of children ran and yelled and larked about, several of Paulino and María's among them. The sight of so much life cheered me up.

When it was time for me to leave, María asked if she could have a copy of my book. Fortunately, I'd thought to bring one with me. 'Here you are, María. But remember, I left a book with Doña Magdalena when I passed through a couple of visits ago. We all admired the photograph of her, sitting next to one of your little girls.'

María looked at me and said, '*El libro está en la caja, Jorge. Está en la caja con la abuela*'.

The family had buried Doña Magdalena with the book.

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My first thanks go to Magdalena González and her offspring, who have extended me hospitality and treated me with courtesy every time I have visited them over the past 13 years. Whether my arrival in the family compound was with film crews led by Lance Wisniewski and Patricia Goudvis, or passing through in the company of graduate students and friends, we were made to feel welcome and appreciated. Despite the sombre nature of what we had to inquire about, there was still an opportunity for light-heartedness. The children invariably found us an object of curiosity. Blanca Estela García was indispensable in her role as strategic go-between. When I wrote up the story of Doña Magdalena initially, my efforts benefited from the critical ear of Maureen McCallum Garvie. I was encouraged when, on two different occasions 10 years apart, my attempts at what Merilyn Simonds calls 'creative non-fiction' were short-listed in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's annual Literary Awards Competition. My colleague Audrey Kobayashi spoke to me of the need to foreground the narrative for a feminist constituency, and I thank her, three anonymous readers, and the editorial staff of Gender, Place and Culture for their suggestions. My work on Guatemala has been supported generously over the years by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

Estar en paz en la milpa: las narrativas mayas y las dinámicas del trabajo de campo en Guatemala

Entre los años 1961 y 1996, la guerra civil en Guatemala se mataron aproximados 200.000 personas, y entre ellas, 80 porcentaje eran indígenas mayas (según la Comisión de la Verdad de las Naciones Unidos). La experiencia de una familia maya, cuya historia se narra en éste artículo, hace preguntas sobre la constante inseguridad, la falta de justicia, y los crimines que no se investigan; los efectos compuestos de los cuales persiguen y influyen la vida comunitaria en todo el campo. La narración de las experiencias de una familia también hace preguntas sobre las vicisitudes de la representación y cómo el trabajo de campo puede, a veces, dar resultados no anticipados pero gratificantes.

Palabras claves: Guatemala; la guerra civil; Rigoberta Menchú; Magdalena González; testimonio maya; narración